

FROM DAWN TO *Deceit*

By Terry Joseph

From Dawn to Deceit

A Suspenseful Conspiracy of Deception,
Love, and Murder

Terry Joseph

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To the two people who continuously encourage creative exploration and
reinforce conviction, touching both my heart and soul:
my beautiful niece Nicole and my best friend Lorne.

Suite 4409

Present Day: May 2004

“Officer! You know that I am entitled to telephone my attorney. What rubbish is transpiring here?” The scrawny red-haired corrections officer with a wooden toothpick dangling from the side of his mouth continued to disregard the pleas of the recently imprisoned, meticulously dressed, and well-spoken businessman. “It is essential that I speak to counsel!”

The corrections officer turned to the sports section, ignoring the handsome dark-skinned individual urgently diverting his attention. “Are you keen on maintaining a paycheck? Officer! I won’t tolerate your disrespect for me. Are you aware of who I am? Do you know what I can have done to you?” The officer smirked at Jasper and sipped his coffee.

“You insolent . . . menial . . . blue-collar drudge!” Jasper shouted.

Fed up with Jasper’s rhetoric, the officer approached Jasper’s jail cell. “Look, Mr. GQ, your money may carry weight downtown on Wall Street, but here in criminal booking, you are just prisoner no. 809.”

Jasper punched the wall, bruising his fist, and angrily shouted, “I will not remain in here another hour!” Stripping Jasper’s freedom compromised his power . . . his worth.

Jasper Anson Cunningham was managing lead partner of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell, LLP, a half-a-billion-dollar New York City financial services firm. He sat alone in a five-by-eight-foot jail cell at the downtown Manhattan holding pen awaiting arraignment in criminal court. His mind raced with disturbing thoughts regarding the turbulent illicit activity that transpired in his partnership firm and his unscrupulous love affairs over the months, weeks, and days leading to his arrest. In spite of Jasper’s meticulous planning, he had not once considered the possibility of being accused of a crime far less arrested. Most of Jasper’s colleagues viewed him as a brilliant, charming, and wealthy executive; but everyone knew his arrogance and greed would misguide him. He presumed his influence and

power were sufficiently cunning to avert discovery. Apparently, Jasper was amiss.

“This filthy place,” Jasper whispered to himself as he rubbed his right temple firmly. “What have they done?” he questioned but with halfhearted disbelief. Jasper stared the officer in the eyes and assumed a different tactic. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Officer Maloney.”

Jasper slowly read his badge mockingly, “Officer LIAM Maloney. You know I will be released very shortly. And you know it’s my right to make a phone call. I will ensure that YOU, OFFICER LIAM MALONEY, are the only name mentioned when I hold the city accountable for violation of my rights. Regardless of what those FBI agents said, you know their covert asses will be protected. Not yours.” Officer Maloney momentarily pondered Jasper’s remarks, knowing his comments were accurate.

Jasper calmly continued, “Now, in spite of what the FBI might have told you, open this cell and get me to a phone. You have nothing to lose. I’m only going to call my attorney. You can stand there and watch me dial . . . listen to the conversation for that matter. But I need to make this call now! Your forty-five-thousand-dollar-a-year job is worthless to ME. Is it for you, Officer LIAM Maloney?”

Swayed by the well-manicured businessman who convincingly stood before him, Officer Maloney looked up and down the hallway and saw no one else around. He quickly opened the cell door, and Jasper stepped out and followed him down the corridor.

Jasper patted him on the shoulder and contently remarked, “Good man! Good man!”

As they approached the end of the hall, Jasper saw the phone in his view. However, the call he needed to make could not be heard by anyone.

“I’ll walk the rest of the way from here, Officer.” Jasper proceeded alone to the phone.

“Hello, I need to speak with Antonio.” Jasper did not call his attorney but instead his Colombian underworld cohort, Antonio Ignacio. Jasper

believed Antonio was obligated to assist him given the money-laundering, racketeering, and embezzling transactions that Jasper and his business partners had facilitated for the Ignacio family over the past few years. However, as Jasper began his conversation with Antonio, the arresting officer, FBI Agent Lawson, stormed into the holding area and dashed toward Jasper on the phone.

“What’s going on here?” Agent Lawson shouted.

Simultaneously, Jasper quickly spoke to the party on the phone, “We have to reconcile this, Antonio. There’s been a grave misunderstanding. The FBI has—”

Midway through Jasper’s sentence, FBI Agent Lawson ripped the telephone receiver out of Jasper’s hands, grabbed Officer Maloney’s nightstick, and clobbered Jasper across the back of his head, and he fell to the ground.

“Drag this prisoner back to his cell immediately before YOU are taking his place,” Agent Lawson said to Officer Maloney.

Jasper was unconscious for about an hour. When he awakened, at that very moment, he was concerned for his freedom and, more importantly, his life. In his thirty-six years, he had never been legally detained although his business activities in recent months caused increased concern over possible federal securities regulatory investigations and even greater concern of being associated with his clients’ felonious criminal activity. Furthermore, increased indiscretion in his personal life clouded his otherwise calculated decision making.

Jasper touched his bloodstained head and rubbed his bruised knuckles as he sat on the urine-stained hard mattress. Unbefitting to his environment, Jasper was dressed in a \$3,600 custom-made navy blue pin-striped suit, the jacket taken away along with his \$25,000 Cartier watch, eighteen-carat gold cuff links, and wallet. His mustard-colored shirt made from pure Egyptian cotton bore his scripted initials JAC on the cuffs. To briefly diffuse the stench of the bed, Jasper sniffed his shirtsleeve and slightly smiled as the scent offered a memory of Tracey, and he reflected on the prior evening.

The Night before Jasper's Arrest

A round of applause resounded in the Crystal Jazz Room on the sixty-second floor of the Vanderbilt building. There were over two hundred affluent millionaires enjoying jazz tunes, cocktails, and gourmet dishes.

"That was Billie Holiday's classic 'It's Very Clear' played by New York City's own Charles Soon and the Soon Quintet," announced the master of ceremony. There was another round of applause. "We will take a fifteen-minute break."

"What have I done in this life to deserve you?" asked Jasper as he stared into Tracey's eyes. Tracey smiled and sipped more wine.

Jasper and Tracey sat in a candlelit semicircle booth in the corner of the elegant clubroom. The lights were dim, and a small number of intimate tables allowed for privacy. Tracey nibbled on sautéed crab cakes in light béarnaise while Jasper enjoyed lobster meat topped with caviar on brochette in an aioli sauce. Tracey drank a glass of Pinot Grigio while Jasper finished his second extra dry vodka martini with olives. To the left of Tracey was the ice bucket containing one-third of the remaining wine.

"You are a beautiful, sexy, intelligent woman. You bring clarity into my complex world. You give a man all that he needs to look forward to . . . another liberating evening of solace."

"Jasper, kiss me." Jasper reached over to Tracey, partially parted his mouth, and kissed Tracey's soft warm lips. He was so gentle yet firm, she thought. This was the oxymoron to Tracey: Jasper is a man whose daily activities included a fast-paced, harsh, aggressive, and oftentimes, brutal business world with cutthroat dealing and swindling. Yet his kiss revealed a man who was passionate and caring. They continued to kiss for a while until Tracey recalled her exciting news. She became giddy and bubbly, almost childlike, quite contrary to her demeanor in the workplace.

"I closed a \$15 billion equity restructuring deal today for one of my dormant clients. This deal was a sleeper for months. Not only did I revive it, but I generated unanticipated record revenues for the investment bank."

“My lady.” Jasper raised his glass, and Tracey followed suit. They smiled at each other and toasted.

“To the smartest female investment banker on the Street.”

“Female?” Tracey asked somewhat insulted by his sexist remark.

“Apologies, apologies,” he conceited. “Investment banker, period. I couldn’t help but say female because none of the investment bankers I have ever dealt with had such a pretty smile.” Jasper touched her chin and kissed her cheek.

“Which company had the stock deal?” asked Jasper.

“Jasper, now you know I can’t say until the news is made public.”

“Sorry. I forgot I’m with a woman who knows about high-profile stock market transactions before most anyone on the Street,” he slyly remarked.

The band reassembled on stage to play another set. An older female singer approached the microphone as the band played an upbeat jazz tempo.

She sang, “On a clear day, rise and look around you. And you’ll see who you are. On a clear day, how it will astound you that the joy of your being outshines every star.”

“I love those lyrics. It’s what life is all about. You can live in a fog, yet [Tracey sang along] on a clear day you can see forever, and ever . . . evermore. I’ve been through so many dark years muddled with pain. Now things are clearer for me.” Tracey looked at Jasper’s eyes and professed, “I love you.”

This greatly pleased Jasper. Although he could have been with most any woman of his choice, Tracey was a rarity, he thought. She was emotionally connected to him, kindhearted, and sexually desirable unlike the scheming, manipulative women he encountered over the years. He kissed her again but, this time, embraced her face lovingly.

Tracey felt his passion and remarked, “Who would have thought the day you were closing the Blackstone & Carter merger deal at my offices that it would lead to this?”

“Oh, I did,” Jasper smugly replied. They burst out laughing, clearly giddy from their cocktails. Jasper caught his breath from his laughter.

“No, seriously, I did,” said Jasper.

“Oh, come on.”

“When I walked into that conference room, we locked eyes. Our inner souls exuded the connection. I remember the day well. Your long brown hair was swept up, and your beautiful neck and eyes were saying, ‘Come take me, my love.’” Jasper touched her hair and kissed her neck, and they both laughed.

Jasper continued, “You held a burgundy Montblanc pen in your left hand with your long lovely fingers.” He took her left hand, placed the tip of her finger in his mouth, and licked it up and down. They laughed again.

“Your shapely, firm round breasts nearly made me holler.” They both laughed incessantly as Tracey knew that he would attempt to kiss her breasts. He playfully bent his head to kiss her cleavage.

“Don’t you dare in public,” Tracey said firmly but with the edge of a challenge. Jasper stopped. Then quickly pecked her cleavage. They laughed.

“And then . . . when you opened your mouth to speak . . . I thought, ‘Goodness, thank you, Father. She is a financial genius.’” He kissed her mouth lovingly.

“Now you know that story is not the truth,” said Tracey. She loved Jasper’s intelligent, precise way of being a man . . . so brilliant, yet so simple.

“Sure it is. I wanted you, and you wanted me just the same, if not more.”

“Of course you know *that* is insane. When I saw that wedding band on your finger, all temporary green buttons turned red immediately. And considering that wedding band is still on your finger, we should talk.”

Jasper’s joy is slightly deflated. “Tracey, come on now. You know we’ve worked out a plan and timeline. It’s only a matter of weeks. Relax,

sweetie. Let's not allow such distracting issues to weigh upon such a beautiful evening."

The waiter came over and poured the remaining wine into Tracey's glass and asked, "Sir, do you and the lady care to have dessert?"

Jasper looked at Tracey. "I will have dessert, but not anything on the menu." Jasper smiled at Tracey and kissed her hand. "We'll have the check please."

They left the jazz room, exited the building, and entered Jasper's private black stretch limousine that waited outside.

"Henry, the usual," Jasper said to his driver.

"Yes, sir," Henry replied.

As they drove through the glaring city lights of Manhattan, Jasper looked at Tracey, knowing how much she loved him. He gave her as much as he could, he thought, that is for a mistress.

As they rode the elevator to the forty-fourth floor of the five-star Regency Palace Hotel, Tracey slipped her right hand into Jasper's pants to touch him; she yearned for Jasper to make passionate love to her every day they were apart. They looked each other squarely in the eyes. Tracey was a tall woman standing at five feet ten inches and, coupled with her four-inch heels, reached Jasper's mouth at six feet two inches with ease. Jasper gently placed his lips on hers and slowly swirled his tongue around her warm mouth. He touched her hand from outside his pants and pressed her fingers against him. They ached for each other, but to Tracey, their relationship was significantly more than sexual encounters. She loved him deeply. They held hands as they walked off the elevator to suite 4409. Jasper placed the card key in the door but, before opening, turned to his side to look at Tracey's hazelnut eyes lovingly.

"Your beauty is simply unimaginable. I love you more than life," Jasper whispered. He tenderly kissed her smooth left cheek as they entered the suite.

Jasper met Tracey every other Thursday for over two years at the Regency Palace Hotel for a romantic evening, oftentimes preceded by an

extravagant dinner at a discreet restaurant. During the summer months, they spent their bimonthly meetings cruising the Hudson River on his personal yacht and relishing the calm of the New York City water and skyline. Tonight, however, they dined and danced at the Crystal Jazz Room, less discreet than they ordinarily would choose, but their affairs became more and more risqué over recent weeks. Thereafter, they would conclude with a nightcap in suite 4409 at the Regency Palace. Although he was financially able, Jasper's suite was reserved for his pleasure as a gift from a prominent hedge fund client who owned a significant equity stake in the hotel. Jasper's business associates were far-reaching and extended many favors.

The hotel's ambiance was elegant and traditional, characteristic of Jasper's and Tracey's personalities. The floors were rich dark walnut with plush Parisian rugs appropriately placed throughout the four-room suite. The cognac-colored drapes were well-tailored and aristocratic with sloping valances and a velvet touch. They were drawn setting off a breathtaking view overlooking Manhattan and the East River. The king-sized mahogany bed with eight-foot-high bedposts displayed a regal eighteenth-century wood-carved design covered with a burgundy-and-gold satin spread that was inviting.

Tracey sat with her legs crossed on the elegant amber french provincial chair in the parlor area of the room. She wore a cobalt blue skirt suit without stockings since her slim bronze legs were smooth and eloquent. Black patent leather Versace pumps dangled on her feet. Her skirt rose above her knees, and her tailored low-cut suit jacket was closely fitted with no blouse underneath. She wore a single strand of diamonds around her slim long neck, one of the many gems that Jasper gifted her over the years.

Jasper was several feet away on a bronze chaise glaring at Tracey's beauty, not speaking a word, as they built the anticipation of the evening. They never rushed their sparse time together. Oftentimes they spent half the night in suite 4409 sipping wine and expressing fantasies as foreplay. Tracey unearthed a sexual quality that other women whom Jasper entangled in his tumultuous life could not. He opened a bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon 1981 that was chilling on ice while continuing to admire his beautiful Tracey. He poured the wine and breathed the aromatic fruits. Tracey

sensually sipped her wine, savoring the nutty taste while momentarily questioning her actions as she routinely did when her deepest feelings were exposed.

Why am I with this man? she silently thought. *A man whom I clearly know is not mine. A man whose wife, Laura, of four years is eight months pregnant with their first child—a son Jasper greatly desired.* Each time Tracey met him, she questioned her goals, as she knew Laura wanted to remain in Jasper's life forever. Tracey could not bear children, and Jasper wanted a namesake and had the potential to be a good role model to a child, she presumed. He smiled at Tracey, and his reassurance removed her fears and doubts.

Mellow from the Cabernet, Tracey was amorous and wanted her handsome tall brown-skinned man to make love to her. She stood up and unbuttoned her pearlized jacket to reveal her full cleavage. Her large breasts longed for Jasper's strong touch; it was the moment she had longed for over the weeks, in between encounters that seemed like months apart. Jasper walked toward her, knowing she felt even stronger desires than those shared earlier. He softly kissed her breasts, and Tracey briefly looked away with a moment of introspection that was quickly overcome by her passionate, never-ending love for him. Tracey looked deeply into his eyes to appreciate his beauty and allowed her heart to be loved and express passion in return. That was all that mattered on this evening.

Tracey drank more wine and rested her crystal wineglass on the black marble table. They walked over to the majestic bed, and she leaned on the posts standing in front of him to allow Jasper to fondle her now completely exposed breasts with nipples erect. Jasper gently licked the outline, tickling Tracey. And she giggled. He cupped her large breasts in his hands while he sucked her nipples, massaging them gently as he kissed them side to side teasingly. Tracey moaned in pleasure from his tantalizing. He smelled her neck with a weakness for her signature perfume that was fragrant in select places on her body. Tracey placed her breast back into his mouth as he relished sucking all that could enter.

In a heated moment, Jasper quickly spun Tracey around and unzipped her skirt to reveal her lilac silk panties that he removed down her legs

before burying his face in the crotch, embellishing in the scent of her body while growing more impatient for her. Jasper licked Tracey's back up and down and placed her onto the bed on her stomach. He gently squeezed the soft of her buttocks then parted her legs and licked her entire crotch from behind, intermittently allowing his tongue to touch her body. She released a screech of joy, urging Jasper for more, getting Tracey uncontrollably excited. She trembled from the rare sensitive sensation.

"Oh, Jasper, don't stop. This is so good. Oh, Jasper, more . . . more. I want you inside of me. Make love to me . . . now." Jasper continued to lick her, and she quivered more.

"Oh my . . . Jasper. Get undressed. I want to feel you inside of my body. Love me . . . love me. I miss you so much."

Jasper wanted to savor the night and, therefore, slowed the pace of the lovemaking.

"No . . . I'm going to make you beg."

"I am so ready for you . . . Oh, make love to me, Jasper."

Jasper rose and undressed while Tracey lay on the bed anxious to proceed. Jasper watched Tracey turn around onto her back and massage herself while he removed his tie, shirt, and pants. She put her finger inside of her body in a pulsating motion as her hips slowly moved up and down on the bed with Jasper standing over her watching. Jasper's erection was now well pronounced. He touched himself firmly and moaned as he watched Tracey stimulate herself.

Tracey rose, took Jasper's hand, and walked to the glass-enclosed shower. Jasper joined Tracey under the warm running water, and they massaged orange blossom liquid body wash all over each other while stimulating their bodies in sensitive places. After they rinsed, they remained in the shower with the warm water still running. Tracey kneeled, and Jasper entered her mouth. She sucked him until he moaned loudly, and then she ceased since she too wanted the evening to last. Tracey backed up against the tile wall in the shower and lifted her slim long legs and wrapped them around his body. Jasper was strong enough to lift both of Tracey's legs in his arms and penetrated her against the shower wall slowly and firmly.

“Oh, love me . . . yes . . . Jasper . . . love me. You fill all of me inside.”

Jasper increased his speed and rhythm. Tracey moaned as he opened her more deeply within as the sudsy water ran over their bodies. His pulsating rhythm was strong and vigorous, the passion immeasurable. She thrust her pelvis forward to get every inch of Jasper inside of her as he simultaneously pushed farther inside of her intensely with rapidly increasing force until she released orgasmic screams. But Jasper wanted more.

With dripping wet bodies, he moved her to the bedroom and tussled and played with her on the mahogany bed. She could not seem to bring herself to utter words as he rubbed and caressed her slippery body. She longingly urged for more as he elevated both of her legs over his shoulders and eased into her juicy warm body. They deeply kissed each other hungrily sucking tongues as Jasper squeezed her voluptuous soft breasts while he forcefully pulsed into her.

Making love with Jasper was the warmest feeling any woman could ever experience, Tracey thought. She felt he was a selfless lover—caring and passionate. Jasper always wanted Tracey to have several orgasms before he allowed himself to do the same. When Jasper paced himself, he could make love to Tracey all night. But his actions were intentional. Jasper was keen on controlling Tracey sexually so that she would do and tell him most anything he wanted outside the bedroom, confidential or not.

After Tracey had climaxed again, Jasper temporarily ceased their lovemaking.

“Would you like more wine?” he asked.

“No, I drank far too much this evening. An espresso would work better.”

Jasper picked up the phone. “Yes, please send up two double espressos and a bottle of Rémy Martin. Oh, I’ll also have the smoked salmon and imported cheese.”

The room had a balcony where they sat in robes eating their hors d’oeuvres. Tracey enjoyed her espresso while Jasper had a snifter of the

cognac. The moonlit starry sky was radiant, and the forty-fourth floor seemed like it was in the clouds.

“So tell me more about the equity restructuring deal you closed today,” Jasper asked.

While appropriately reluctant earlier in the evening, a content, slightly inebriated Tracey responded, “You should have been in the boardroom today, Jasper.”

Encouraging the conversation, Jasper reached over and pecked her on the cheek. “I’m sure my lady was a superstar.”

“It was the Schultz Insurance Group. You know that blue-blood company has always been difficult. Anyway, they will be issuing preferred and common stock for a newly incorporated group of insurance subsidiaries. We packaged an innovative equity product with option clauses that investors will pay a premium price for. The capital raised will be used to purchase high-risk securities, largely in emerging markets. Venezuela and Brazil will be two main targets with allocation to the Chinese market as well.”

“You are unbelievable, my global banker. How soon will they close?” he probed.

“The international regulatory approval is done. They plan to publicly hit the market by Tuesday the twenty-fifth.”

Jasper smiled. “Is there anything my lady can’t do well?” He obtained all his desired inside information.

Jasper turned to Tracey and kissed her again on the patio. They both stood up near the rail of the balcony.

“Turn around,” Jasper whispered in her ear. Tracey turned, and Jasper leaned her upper body over the balcony of the forty-fourth floor. Tracey trusted Jasper and was unafraid.

“Spread your legs, sweetie.”

Jasper helped to part her legs and entered inside of Tracey. She shrieked in ecstasy. She was hanging over the balcony edge as he made love to her

from behind. Tracey loved the excitement, pain, and pleasure. They made love under the stars above the New York City streets. She enjoyed these times when Jasper let loose with daring lovemaking. It made her orgasm stronger. They were both risk takers in every aspect of their lives. Jasper held Tracey from behind as her upper torso hung over the balcony. The stars were above, and the threat of falling forty-four stories on her mind.

“Yes, Jasper . . . push . . . harder . . . harder,” Tracey shouted. The combined danger of falling and the sexual pleasure was enormously stimulating for both of them. Tracey raised her left leg for deeper penetration and lost her footing, and Jasper grabbed her back onto the balcony. They laughed and continued with even more drunken pleasure. This behavior was not unusual for them as Jasper would customarily perch Tracey on the railing edge of his yacht while they engaged in passionate sex. On one occasion, she actually fell into the water from his wild sexual force and caused a stir when local coast guards had to assist Tracey naked out of the Rockaways. The threat of peril thrilled both of them as Jasper pushed deeper with each forceful thrust, knocking her off balance. He grabbed her hips and continued with intense pressure, and Jasper finally climaxed inside of her. Tracey turned to look at him.

“I love you, Mr. Cunningham.”

“I love you beyond life itself, Tracey Bodden.”

They embraced each other with a warm loving kiss, knowing they would not experience this passion until they met again in two weeks. But for tonight, they were both comforted.

The Arrest

Present Day: Back to the Courthouse

Jasper grew increasingly impatient. “This bureaucratic bullshit! I’ve been in this jail cell for over twenty-four hours. Where the hell is everyone?” he whispered to himself.

The gray musty cell was becoming darker as Jasper paced within his surroundings in frustration. Graffiti covered most of the walls while shiny metal bars contrasted the dreariness of the unfamiliar atmosphere. It was relatively quiet for a jail, he thought, with no other prisoners in sight since his arrest. However, he was not upset by those circumstances since he did not desire company. On occasion, a corrections officer would pass through the hall intent to engage in conversation; however, Jasper was not inviting.

After another hour had passed, Jasper ceased pacing and stared at a graffiti marking above the bed. The letters were bold, strongly pronounced in red and black, and his eyes remained steadfast on the words. “Son Knee.” How absurd, he thought, it was for anyone to identify himself on a jail wall: an institution where one lacked power and is unable to control their actions at will. Jasper thought, *Limited minds portray themselves in such an irrelevant way.*

Where the hell is Laura? Why hasn’t she arrived yet? I need to get back to my business. Jasper’s lavish lifestyle in New York City was significantly different from his upbringing in his hometown Memphis, Tennessee.

Flashback: Jasper’s Childhood

Jasper’s father, Roy Cunningham, was an unyielding family man strong in his convictions. It was the mid-1960s when Roy arrived in Memphis, Tennessee, at eighteen years old from his birthplace Belmont, Alabama, just over one hundred miles south of Memphis. Roy was not a particularly clever man, but his charisma and motivation quickly linked him with a group of men who managed a profitable local dance venue on West End Street called the Hot Toddy. Gamblers bet on illegal numbers and played poker in the cellar. The men sold homemade spirits by the glass in the side

lounge, and women were prostituted on the second floor. The guests enjoyed dance music every night of the week until the early hours of the morning.

Roy earned a handsome \$4,000 a week comanaging the activities at the Hot Toddy for twelve years. The lucrative pay afforded him a two-story single-family home from his rewarding earnings that was unusual for a young man to afford, particularly during the racially challenging era. However, the police didn't disturb the owners or patrons at the nightclub since Roy and his partners refrained from selling narcotics, and the local inspectors were sufficiently compensated for their ignorance.

At twenty-one years old, Roy married Annette Johnson, a local Memphis lady, three years his junior, who worked as a certified nursing assistant at a medical facility for the mentally disabled. She was Creole, light-skinned with green eyes, her descendants originally from New Orleans. In spite of being five feet two inches, she commanded respect, and her caring instincts nurtured the family and held them together over the years. After several miscarriages, Jasper was born and was the only child. In spite of Roy cherishing his blessing, he was away from the home sometimes nearly eighteen hours a day, leaving most of Jasper's rearing to his mother. She ensured Jasper received a good education and was committed to providing quality guidance to her only child.

Jasper, however, was emotionally scarred by what he witnessed and experienced at his father's business. As an ambitious youth, Jasper knew his father always had a lot of money from gambling, and he naïvely wanted the same for himself as a youth. One Friday night, at twelve years old, Jasper followed his father's burgundy-and-white Cadillac to work on his bicycle. The Hot Toddy was a mile away in the Downtown Memphis area. Jasper rode as fast as he could to keep up with his father's car yet remain a safe distance behind to avoid getting noticed. When Roy arrived at the nightclub, he parked his car at the curbside. He greeted a burly bodyguard at the door who was about six and a half feet tall and three hundred pounds. Jasper, panting and out of breath, watched his father from half a block away.

"What's happening, Chuck?"

“Hey, Mr. Cunningham.”

“What’s the crowd like in there tonight?”

“Spending money on cards and drinking moonshine.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” The men laughed.

Chuck opened the door for Roy to enter and resumed his powerful stance in front of the nightclub. Knowing Chuck would not allow him inside, Jasper snuck down the alleyway on the side of the building and hid his bicycle in a corner. The basement windows were tinted, but he peered through a small hole and saw men and women hovered over card tables gambling in the smoke-filled room. He pulled on each of the windows but was unsuccessful in opening any of them. As he was about to try the last window, a woman surprisingly approached him.

“Hey, sugar. What are you doing lurking at them windows?” Startled, Jasper looked at the sexy twenty-two-year-old young woman but did not answer. Her tightly fitted silver sequined dress that exposed nearly all of her huge breasts shimmered in the alley lights. Matching silver sandals revealed bright red polished toenails that matched her long fingernails. Every so often, she would throw her head back to untangle her long brown silky wig from her red feather boa.

“Don’t you have anything to say, cutie?” she asked.

Jasper liked the endearment that the strange woman expressed.

“I was trying to get into the club. I want to play cards.”

“Play cards? How old are you?”

“I’m eighteen.”

“Eighteen? You don’t look eighteen. And if you were, why wouldn’t you just go right up to the front door?”

“Well, I am. I just don’t have ID to prove it yet. Can you get me inside?”

“Cutie, are you trying to get me fired? I can’t bring you in the Hot Toddy.”

“I have money.” Jasper showed the strange young woman \$50.

“Where did you get that money from?”

“I told you, I’m eighteen. I work.”

“Oh really?”

“Yeah. And I could get plenty more anytime I want,” Jasper dishonestly bragged.

The woman was intrigued by the money. “What’s your name, cutie?”

“Jasper.”

“Well, Jasper, I’m Lynn. What is it you think you want to do with that money?”

“I told you, I play cards.”

“Jasper, there ain’t no way I can get you through that front door. Even if I did, you won’t be able to play cards at them tables.” Jasper was miserably disappointed. Lynn, however, saw an opportunity for her to earn quick money.

“You know, there is other grown-up fun you can have at the Hot Toddy.” Jasper looked at Lynn puzzled but interested.

“You see that fire escape there?” Jasper nodded his head. “You climb up to that window on the second floor.” Lynn pointed to the window. “I’m going inside, and I will meet you up there in five minutes.”

Lynn left Jasper and walked to the front of the club. She headed upstairs to her regular room where she entertained men nightly. Lynn opened the window, and Jasper slowly entered the room. Jasper looked around the small room with red-painted walls, a folding table with a bottle of whiskey and paper cups on top, and a round-shaped bed that was covered with a red shiny spread and four red velvet pillows. Lynn knew this would be the easiest \$50 she would earn for the night. It did not matter to her that the money was from a young boy. Clients generally paid only \$10 an hour for her time and hard work.

Anxious but curious as to what Lynn had to offer, Jasper handed over the immediately requested \$50 to Lynn. Jasper stood still in front of Lynn while she sat on the bed unbuckling his blue jeans. She dropped his pants and underwear to his ankles without taking off his sneakers. Recognizing the interaction was going to be quick, Lynn didn't bother to undress. She lifted her dress halfway and pulled her panties to the side and told Jasper to get on top of her. Lynn guided twelve-year-old Jasper who wanted to demonstrate he was a man, so he obediently followed directions. She switched places, sexually molesting innocent but strongly willing Jasper. She taught him how to tongue kiss her while synchronizing his pelvic rhythm and hip motions with hers. Jasper didn't understand what was happening to his body; however, he knew Lynn's lips, hands, and her slipperiness inside made him feel good all over. Lynn recognized her tutorial session was about to end and let out a few moans to make Jasper believe he made a grown woman happy. He now felt he was part of the action at his father's business, an adult participant at the club, a man.

"Cutie, you said you can keep getting this money?" Jasper nodded his head. "Then you come to my window every Friday about this here time, and you show me how much of a man you are again." In the middle of Jasper dressing, there was a loud knock on Lynn's door. It was a client.

"Cutie, you go on home now. I'll see you next week. But you can't come here if you don't have money. OK?" Jasper exited through the window, down the fire escape, jumped on his bicycle, and gleefully made his way home.

Although Jasper wanted to return, he was concerned about the feasibility of future visits to the Hot Toddy. It would be difficult to get that much money every week. It took him nearly a year to save the money he had from his milk route, paper delivery, and bag packing at the supermarket. As he rode home on his bicycle desperately thinking of a solution, he recalled that his father kept mounds of cash from the business in the top drawer of his bureau. There were hundreds of dollars largely from gambling bets. Hence, Jasper took \$50 each week out of his father's money to visit Lynn each Friday for four months. He was smitten by Lynn; she was his sweetheart, the first love of his life. However, oftentimes, when Jasper

arrived at her fire escape window on a Friday night, Lynn was with a client. Jasper peered into the room through the window watching other men having sex with Lynn. On occasion, they were rough, vulgar, drunk men hurting her, he thought, beating her backside, sometimes with a belt. Jasper hated watching those men touching her, and he couldn't understand why Lynn would allow men to hurt her physically. But he confusingly saw she appeared to enjoy their behavior because Lynn always wanted more.

One hot summer Friday night when Jasper arrived, the window was partially open. Jasper overheard the man in Lynn's room demand money that Lynn owed. The man shouted that she could not keep working at the Hot Toddy if she didn't figure out a way to pay up. Jasper witnessed the man slap Lynn in the face. Jasper was upset that he hit Lynn, and he wanted to enter the room to help his first love, so he decided to get a weapon. He quickly left in search of something in the alleyway that he could use to protect Lynn. When he returned with a half-broken bottle, there was another man in the room. It was his father, Roy, who had joined the other man. Jasper froze. Lynn clearly had been beaten further. The men took turns holding Lynn down and raping her. Jasper was infuriated as he watched his father and the other man hurt his sweetheart, the woman who cared about him and made him a man. After the men were through with Lynn, they demanded that she leave the Hot Toddy and never return. She swore that she would pay them their money. Jasper returned to that window for months looking for Lynn, but she never resurfaced. Deeply hurt, Jasper concluded that Lynn had not loved him like he had loved her. She never said good-bye. He innocently believed she should have seen him one last time before leaving.

For months thereafter, Jasper returned to the window at the Hot Toddy and watched the activity in Lynn's former room, the demeaning ways in which men misused women, and Jasper felt each woman deserved the degrading treatment. He believed women could not be trusted because they would desert you and that if you allowed yourself to reveal your feelings, they would undoubtedly take advantage of your vulnerabilities. And from time to time, he believed, physical pain from men was warranted. Furthermore, Jasper had deep hatred toward his father Roy for raping and chasing Lynn away.

Roy eventually figured out Jasper had stolen his money. From then on, Roy would unjustifiably beat Jasper for minor things Jasper had done wrong while his mother helplessly watched afraid to utter a word in Jasper's defense. Jasper's early childhood experiences, including the sexual encounters with Lynn, the activity he witnessed in the windows of the Hot Toddy, the physical abuse from his father, and the lack of support from his mother significantly affected his outlook on life and future relationships, particularly with women.

When the late 1970s arrived, there were demands for drugs: marijuana, heroin, pills, and opium. Reluctant to partake in what he viewed as a corrupt franchise that was overly risky, Roy pulled out from the Hot Toddy. His partners stayed in business for several more years selling drugs and expanding the gambling to blackjack tables, slot machines, and craps turning the Hot Toddy into a lucrative casino and nightclub. Several of his former partners became wealthy men and later relocated to Las Vegas right before the business was brought down by the Federal Narcotics Division.

From thereafter, the Cunningham home was emotionally unbalanced. Roy would on occasion rant about his hasty decision to exit the business. He reflected on his high income in the early years and his lost opportunity to partake in moneymaking activities in Downtown Memphis. Roy's reminiscing oftentimes resulted in depression.

Roy assumed a new profession as a plumber at the Memphis Plumbing Society but also had become a womanizer. As a teenager, Jasper was exposed to his father's adulterous behavior. Jasper oftentimes would accompany his father on plumbing calls. Roy's plumbing visits were more social than work-related. While Jasper was in the kitchen repairing pipes, his father tended to women in their bedrooms. On several occasions, Roy offered the women to Jasper after he was done with them, and Jasper accepted. In return, these women received free repair services; therefore, Roy brought limited money to the household. Although Roy never received an official plumber's license, he performed plumbing duties for his company until he died at the age of fifty-one from a heart attack. Annette Cunningham died one year after Roy from diabetic complications.

Realization of his parent's financial and emotional shortcomings became apparent when, as a young man, Jasper earned an academic scholarship to attend Columbia University Business School in New York. Jasper studied with wealthy classmates such as New York State Governor Hammond's son Alexander and Senator Wallington's daughter, Sarah, who grew up in very prominent areas in New York and Chicago, respectively. His peers were focused on their parents' dreams, solid self-worth, healthy personal relationships, and unlimited financial potential—all with a balanced perspective that Jasper lacked. Jasper searched for this balance throughout his college years, in fact his entire life, but his process of doing so was always at the detriment of someone else.

Jasper was quite popular at Columbia and excelled academically. He was competitive and ambitious, becoming president of the Student Business Association, the National Debate Club, and the Chess Club. He had a couple of rivals at Columbia, most notably was Ramone Santos. Jasper was two years Ramone's junior, but they were in the same academic year. As a result of his honorary achievements in grade school, Jasper had skipped two levels before starting college. Ramone and Jasper competed for similar positions in the university clubs and associations at Columbia, and Jasper consistently won. Ramone's competitive spirit morphed into deep envy.

Once during Ramone and Jasper's junior year, Ramone was headed to his dormitory room and saw Jasper in the study hall.

"Hey, Jasper, are you interviewing with Prewitt and Sons today for the senior year scholarship?"

"I hadn't heard about it. How is eligibility determined?" Jasper inquired.

"It's based on your grade point average. The intent is to begin a relationship with the firm early so that they can select individuals to extend job offers upon graduation."

"My senior year is fully funded. I won't need to interview for a scholarship. Besides, I plan to work for Williams and Watts when I graduate."

Later that afternoon, a line of students formed in front of Locus Hall for thirty-minute interviews with Prewitt and Sons. Ramone was the twenty-

third person on line. Much to his surprise, he saw Jasper already on line more than ten people ahead of him. Two weeks later, two people were chosen to receive the scholarship, Jasper and a female math major. Ramone was infuriated. He approached Jasper outside of the dormitory.

“Jasper, what happened? I thought you didn’t need the scholarship from Prewitt.”

“I don’t,” Jasper smirked. “It’s about competing and winning. Feels good. Need a loan?” Jasper laughed and walked away.

Ramone shouted behind him, “You are so pompous!”

Jasper shouted back, “Hey, remain hopeful, there’s next year. Oh, sorry, you might have graduated already.”

After completing his studies at Columbia University, Jasper worked on Wall Street for Williams and Watts brokerage house selling financial products as he expected. Two years later, he attended Harvard Business School for a master’s degree majoring in international finance and business management. Upon graduating, he was courted by top investment banks, but he chose to work for the number 1 management consulting firm in the world, Payne Foster. Jasper earned a good salary, had great potential, and was on track to become a partner at the firm. But for Jasper, the power was not coming broad and fast enough. He wanted to run his own company and direct his destiny. Therefore, he had to establish his own firm.

Jasper meticulously chose Jonathan Gates and Mark Waddell as potential partners. Jonathan was a former business school colleague at Harvard University. He studied finance and had previously earned a certified public accountancy and was a certified financial analyst. He was a financial genius who understood the stock and bond markets in depth, largely a result of his early bond trading and equity analyst work. However, the business savvy that came so naturally to Jasper was a struggle for Jonathan. While Jonathan could construct the most complex transactions with high earning potential, he could not sell or market his products to investors.

Unlike Jonathan, Mark was not a technical genius. However, he possessed the trusting personal characteristics enabling him to sell clients

worthless junk bonds for the price of a triple A-rated security. But oftentimes, Mark crossed the ethical line putting his former employer in great financial and reputational risk. Jasper knew Mark from working at Payne Foster where Mark was denied partnership in the firm and was in the market looking for career alternatives.

Jasper recognized the complementary strengths the three men offered and the tremendous potential to become a formidable business partnership. But Jasper wanted to prove his hopefulness to ensure his optimism was solid. One Sunday in the fall of 1996, Jasper invited Mark and Jonathan to go white-tailed deer hunting upstate New York in the Adirondack wilderness. The men looked forward to the opportunity to bond and retreat from the city. After driving eight hours, they arrived at the camp lodge in rural terrain that was less than a mile from a river flowing with trout.

The following day, the men set off hunting. There weren't any active game in the woods that day, but that was fine with Jasper since he had other plans. The three men regrouped to decide whether or not to relinquish hunting.

Seemingly out of the blue, Jasper asked, "I need to know, Jonathan, do you have balls?" Jonathan looked at Jasper confused.

Jasper continued, "I'm asking you, do you have the gumption to fight for what you believe is right?"

"Jasper, what are you talking about? I think this fresh air has overcome you." Jonathan looked at Mark, and they both laughed at Jasper's remarks, but Jasper remained serious. Jasper lifted his rifle and jammed it to Mark's neck, grabbing his arm.

"Jonathan, if I cock this gun right now, would you stop me?"

"Hey, Jasper, what's the matter with you?" Jonathan asked.

Jasper shouted with anger and malice, "I asked you a goddamn question! Jonathan, would you attempt to stop me from killing Mark right now in this place in the middle of nowhere? No one will know."

With the rifle firmly pressed on Mark's neck, Jasper cocked the weapon. It was difficult for Mark to speak, but he said, "Hey, man . . . you're fucking

around a little too close to my jugular. Pull your rifle back.”

Jasper turned to look at Mark. “Are you afraid, Mark? Jonathan, I’ll ask you again, would you try to stop me?”

Still confused, Jonathan asked, “Why are you doing this?” Jasper continued to hold the rifle at Mark’s neck. Jonathan knew he had to answer Jasper in order to make headway in the situation. “You’re damn right I would stop you!”

Jasper looked away to respond to Jonathan when Mark grabbed the barrel of the rifle and pointed it up to the sky. A shot went off. No one was hurt. Jasper began to laugh.

“I had to test you motherfuckers to see where we stand, to evaluate your personalities in unexpected crises.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, Jasper?” demanded Mark.

“Nothing’s wrong. I learned a hell of a lot about you in my test. Jonathan, notice you said you would stop me because I had no reason. So what might happen if I had a reason? You might go along with me? You could be convinced to do what you thought was logical even at the peril of another. Mark, you never eluded fear. But you weren’t sure whether or not I was joking, and you assumed the worst. And when you pulled that rifle, you pointed it to the sky. Not at me. You didn’t try to take revenge on me even though you weren’t sure whether or not I was about to kill you.”

“You are crazy, Jasper. What the hell are you trying to prove out here in the wilderness?”

“That we are partners. We complement each other.”

The men walked back to the camp lodge. Both Mark and Jonathan were perplexed by Jasper’s dangerous way of understanding their personalities. But as the night progressed, in some bizarre way, Jasper’s justification became less obscure. The three men caught brook trout and ate at the lodge. They discussed establishing a partnership, planned their organizational structure, and determined the capital necessary to commence operations. It was clear to all three men that Jasper would be lead partner.

Cunningham, Gates & Waddell rapidly built their client base and revenues over eight years to become a corporate powerhouse. Jasper oftentimes entered and closed deals without Jonathan and Mark's approval, but they trusted Jasper. At times, Jonathan and Mark were uncomfortable with the risks that Jasper exposed them to, but Jasper made them very wealthy men; hence, they very seldom inquired about the nature of questionable transactions.

Present Day: Back at the Courthouse Jail

Jasper was now lying on the jail bed having reflected on his childhood in Memphis, his college days, and the launch of his firm. During those times, he never thought he would embarrassingly end up doing the “perp walk” in front of his staff at the empire he built. The degrading circumstances in jail were nearly as humiliating as the mortifying manner of his arrest. Jasper paced his cell again reflecting on the morning of his arrest.

Earlier That Day Preceding the Arrest

Three enforcement division FBI agents dressed in dark suits, white shirts, and burgundy ties entered into the high-rise office building of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell, LLP, in New York City. They boarded the elevators located on Park Avenue at 10:30 am. One agent carried a stainless steel briefcase, steadfast and purposeful. Two civilian men accompanied the FBI agents. Their aim was to take into custody the partners at the firm.

As they exited the elevator on the forty-ninth floor, they marched straight past the receptionist.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen, please,” shouted the well-groomed middle-aged receptionist. “We have protocol for unannounced visits—” But the three officials and two men ignored her and were already halfway down the office hall before she picked up the phone to call security.

The offices were breathtaking. The six-foot-high windows set off views of the East River in Manhattan. The french double doors were solid walnut with brass doorknobs. The carpet was blood red, and the ceilings were twenty-five feet high with Victorian chandeliers. The offices were old

traditional that was unusual for young executives, but the partners strongly favored the richness and beauty of the décor.

The officials headed to the northeast corner office. Mark Waddell—partner, a single playboy, his only family a married sister in Virginia—sat in his office unsettled. As the group of men approached, Mark walked over to his hidden bar and pulled down the door and poured a cognac. As he gulped a mouthful, the officials entered. The two men walked over to Mark while the three FBI agents waited at the entrance of the door.

“Sir, place the glass down and put your hands behind your head,” said Agent Lawson.

Mark calmly stated, “What bullshit game is this? You bastards. You only want the wealth to yourselves. As soon as we get an opportunity to indulge, you eradicate. Who is lining your purse? There is absolutely no reason for—”

The civilian swiftly strong-armed Mark.

Mark more sternly shouted, “Bullshit. Who is paying you off?” This remark angered the man who slammed Mark onto the nineteenth-century wooden desk.

“You thieving, corrupt son of a bitch,” the man said to Mark. Mark struggled with the man who swiftly pulled out a .38-caliber gun from the waistband of the back of his pants and flipped Mark around to face him. He pointed the barrel between Mark’s lips. “Would my gun blowing your fucking teeth out of your head feel like a payoff?”

FBI Agent Alexander Lawson sternly approached Mark and the man at the desk. “Hey, slow your shit, Sullivan. This is an FBI arrest.” Agent Lawson turned to his partner Agent Cooper, and said, “Stay here with Sullivan before his crazy ass thinks he is on a street hit. You guys, come with me.”

Agents Lawson, Patterson, and the other man set off toward the northwest corner of the floor. Employees were standing outside their offices with concerned faces, and a female employee burst out in a scream while another cried attempting to cover her mouth with her hands. The men

entered the office of Jonathan Gates who, as a husband and father of two daughters under ten years old, was putting on his suit jacket to flee when they entered.

Agent Patterson asked, “Jonathan Gates?”

Jonathan replied, “He just went down the hall. I am a client from the company Tough as Plastics.” Jonathan attempted to scurry past Agent Patterson. As Jonathan walked by, the second man who recognized him from the photo took out his gun and pistol-whipped Jonathan in the back of his head. A gush of blood spurted out, and Jonathan fell to the floor.

“You fragile, sissy, spineless—” The man kicked Jonathan in his kidney while Jonathan lay on the floor bleeding.

“You are no different from Sullivan,” said Agent Lawson to the pistol whipper. “Stay here and cuff this prick. Two down and one to go,” said Lawson.

Agents Lawson and Patterson walked to the stairwell and headed up to the fiftieth floor. They exited into a full office suite where Jasper Cunningham was standing looking out of his ten-feet-high window with a view of New York City. Without turning around to face them, Jasper asked himself, “Why today? It is such a peaceful spring day. There is not a cloud in the sky . . . and the sun is as bright as I’ve ever seen.” He turned around to look at the two men, but he was puzzled. He was not expecting law enforcement. “What brings this on? I thought for sure—”

“No, Cunningham. This is federal business. We are getting the action. I’m FBI Agent Lawson, and this is Agent Patterson.” Jasper was semi-relieved as he thought underground hit men were greeting him. Jasper chuckled in relief and smirked discreetly.

“Listen, pretty boy, don’t fuck with us. Our better halves are downstairs taking a chunk out of your partners’ asses. I will not hesitate to call either of them up here to grind you to a pulp.”

In a very businesslike way, Jasper approached the men more comfortably as he realized they were not there to end his life. “What on

earth, officers, do you want from an upstanding businessman such as me? Did I not file my taxes on time?" he asked curtly.

"Cute. You are quite flippant," remarked Agent Lawson. He took the stainless steel briefcase he had been carrying and walked over to Jasper's conference table near the window, placed the briefcase down, and opened it to reveal a stack of documents marked Confidential.

"Jasper Cunningham, we have enough evidence against you to send your Gucci-wearing ass to the federal penitentiary for quite some time. I WILL place you under arrest very shortly. But let's chat first. You want to chat, Cunningham? Oh, I wiped that fancy ass grin off your mug."

Lawson looked at Agent Patterson and shouted, "These arrogant bastards are making quite a bit of money and leaving me WITHOUT!" He turned to Jasper and approached him face-to-face. "You better get serious real quick, Cunningham!"

"There are auditing opinions on sixty-seven public companies that your firm has issued clean audit opinions. We know damn well your company was aware of, and in some cases responsible for, committing fraud, embezzlement, and deception to investors on the profitability and soundness of the financial positions of these companies. The FBI is only aware of four of the more minor cases that I have in my briefcase. I can blow that up right here, and I dare not think of the disparity in the prison sentence you will get when you are convicted of all sixty-seven cases. And trust me, I will ensure a conviction even if I have to buy a jury pool."

"You dirty scavenger."

"You see, that's where you're wrong. I'm not a scavenger, Cunningham. I'm saving you from a lifetime in prison. I am your savior. Recognize it for what it is. And what about murder? There is evidence of missing investors who were about to come forth to speak with the U.S. District Attorney's Office."

"Bullshit. That can't be linked back to Cunningham, Gates & Waddell."

"So you hope."

"I'll take my chances on that."

“I thought you were smarter, Cunningham.”

Understanding the severity of the charges, Jasper knew it was in his best interest to negotiate with Lawson. However, he tenaciously assumed an unknowing posture.

“Until I hear what you have, this is all talk.”

“In seven of those cases, we have investors who were going to report unusual activity to the officials and have now suspiciously disappeared. Embezzlement and fraud have mounted into the tens of millions of dollars, all of which I assure you can be traced back to your firm. At a minimum, as long as the embezzlement sticks, you’re looking at twenty-five to forty years.”

Jasper turned away and stared out the window.

Agent Lawson smirked, “Not so fucking funny anymore, Cunningham, huh? The landscape got brown very quickly.”

Inundated with clients that were under investigation by the U.S. Department of Justice and the Securities and Exchange Commission for defrauding shareholders and embezzling corporate money, Jasper’s firm attempted to conceal extensive evidence of falsified client records. The allegations against these companies, if found to be true, could implicate Cunningham, Gates & Waddell since they issued legitimate audit opinions in spite of their knowledge of the corporate malfeasance. Furthermore, the investment valuation arm of their firm provided inflated prices on companies and investment securities in order to increase the asset valuation and net worth of their clients. As a result of their illegal and unethical actions, Cunningham, Gates & Waddell received exorbitant client fees in order to bypass mentioning the deficiencies and worthless assets they discovered in client records.

Cunningham, Gates & Waddell, LLP, financial services firm conducted significant business with private equity firms dealing in high stakes merger and acquisition transactions. Jasper’s firm also ensured mergers were not jeopardized by issuing assurances around the integrity of the financial statements of companies and the value of the company up for sale. Companies buying another company would need to obtain valuation pricing

of deals to assess the potential profit on future transactions. Obtaining legitimate valuations and audit opinions are critical to the success of closing billion-dollar deals to prove that the company had sound financial practices and was financially strong. Investors needed this comfort in order to place their money in high-risk, high-income potential stock transactions. Cunningham, Gates & Waddell, LLP, gave investors the necessary comfort.

Jasper and his partners conducted business with clients that their competitor firms would never deal with. One of their clients, Silverton Inc., proved to be particularly questionable. Two years ago, on the evening Jasper notified senior management at Silverton Inc. of his firm's intent to withdraw from the account, the CEO Braxton Harper contacted Jasper to persuade him to rethink his firm's withdrawal. Enticed with personal deposits of \$10 million to Jasper and each of his partners, Jasper engaged the \$20-billion initial public stock offering deal and knowingly overvalued the worth on the company's balance sheet. The audit division of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell blessed the financial statements and health of Silverton Inc. that caused investors to rally behind the stock deal. The stock price of Silverton Inc. took off from \$15 per share to \$93 per share within two days, generating significant wealth for the executives of the firm. Two years later, the artificial strength of the company became apparent, the company filed bankruptcy, and investors were caught holding worthless stock. CEO Braxton Harper had embezzled billions of dollars from the firm by that time and fled the country.

Another major client, Ignacio Industries, owned by the Ignacio family, is known to have ties with the underworld. The Ignacio family allegedly silenced irate inquiring investors when suspicions were heightened; however, family members never have been charged.

"What do you bastards want from me and my firm?"

Lawson looked at Patterson and laughed. "Your firm? I'm tired of your pompous shit, you son of a bitch! Agent Patterson, can you wait outside the office door please." Agent Patterson left and closed the door behind him.

Agent Lawson continued, "Get this straight, Cunningham, I'm not here to negotiate with you." Lawson presumptuously sat in Jasper's chair behind

his desk. He spun around a few times in Jasper's seat like a child who was brought to work by his parents.

"I can help you out of this problem. The remaining files can disappear. The boys at the DA's office don't have to know anything about these cases. Of course, I can't do much about the four lesser cases your partners, not you, are already charged in committing. But everyone knows, Cunningham, you're the partner with the brains and the power. You make and break deals around this firm."

Jasper felt defeated. "How much do you want?"

"Fifty million."

Jasper loudly shouted, "You must have lost your fucking mind!"

"Really, then you must have lost your fucking desire for freedom."

"I would be a fool to pay you that kind of money," Jasper dismissed the proposal. "I don't even know whether your evidence is legitimate."

"The files are right here. Take a look. I have all day."

Jasper paused and contemplated the matter. "It would be impossible to get that amount of money."

"You see, Cunningham, that's where my evidence tells me differently. Have you ever heard your voice played on tape in a courtroom making deals to defraud small investors? In front of a judge, jurors, reporters, even your lovely wife?"

"One million dollars, you piece of shit."

"Are you insulting me, Cunningham?"

Jasper shouted, "One thing I will not do is negotiate my money with a lowlife like you. Do you have any idea what \$50 million is? You take a fucking subway to work every day. Any goddamn amount of money will be an improvement for you."

"Fuck you, Cunningham!"

"Fuck you! And get your goddamn feet off my desk!" Lawson did not move and only smirked.

“Listen, Cunningham. Negotiate with me because either way, I’ll get paid. I can get paid fifty million by the Ignacio family for turning them evidence that you stole hundreds of millions from them, or I can get paid by you. In the first scenario, I also will be forced to turn over cases to the government. I might as well get accolades from my bosses for work well done. And guess what, you will go to jail. Pick your choice. Fifty million. Last call.”

“You filthy scum. I will never pay you \$50 million for anything. Go to hell!”

Lawson called for his partner who waited outside the office door.

“Patterson, book this prick!”

“Jasper Cunningham, you’re under arrest for fourteen counts of embezzlement, twenty-four counts of intentional fraud and deception of investors, and seven counts of money laundering!”

“Both of you can go to hell!” With those remarks, Patterson punched Jasper across the jaw and handcuffed him with his face pressed against the large glass windowpanes.

Who Are You?

Present Day: Early Morning (5:00 am) before Jasper's Arrest

After a night with Jasper at the Regency Palace Hotel, Tracey entered her condominium apartment in the early hours, Friday morning. She planned to visit Jasper's office later that morning to further discuss the sustainability of their relationship. Two years had passed, and the indiscreet lifestyle had run its course. Furthermore, partaking in adulterous behavior was contrary to her upbringing.

Tracey's family was Caribbean immigrants from a remote island in the south named St. Tilly. The people of the island were humble with only fishing trades and minor agricultural opportunities for those wealthy enough to establish exporting relationships. Her parents died when she was seventeen years old, and her granduncle Harold and his wife, Carly, migrated Tracey to the United States shortly thereafter.

Tracey's Childhood

Uncle Harold was committed to his trade as a shoemaker and Aunt Carly was a seamstress. Uncle Harold owned a twenty-by-eighteen-foot shop five miles outside of Atlanta, Georgia. He was fifty-eight years old when Tracey came to live with them. He and Carly never had children, so although they were older, Tracey was the child they never had. They were an honest couple that maintained solid values and believed in payoff from hard work.

One autumn day in 1988, Uncle Harold was working at his shoemaking business when an out-of-town Georgian farmer in denim overalls with blond hair and facial hair entered Uncle Harold's shop. The farmer was accompanied by his eleven-year-old granddaughter.

"Boy, how much you charge to repair the soles on my work boots?" questioned the farmer.

Uncle Harold was never surprised by the arrogance and crudeness of many of the passersby in the South. Although he had not experienced such racial prejudices in his Caribbean hometown, it was commonplace in the

Deep South. He had become relatively immune for he knew whether or not this ignorant farmer was challenged; there would be yet another and another with similar attitudes. When he first came to the United States, Uncle Harold believed he could change one mind at a time. But he lost the steam and willpower after so many years of repeated rudeness.

“That will be \$4.50,” answered Uncle Harold.

“OK, boy. Repair them up nice for me.” The farmer stepped outside and rolled a tobacco cigarette while his granddaughter Cindy watched Uncle Harold work. Uncle Harold pulled out his repair tools and placed the farmer’s boots on the shoe cutter. Cindy was intrigued by the size and sounds of the machinery.

The telephone rang, and Uncle Harold turned his back to answer it. It was Tracey calling to say Aunt Carly unexpectedly had a stroke, and they could not revive her. She suffered a heart attack and died almost instantaneously.

“No . . . no . . . not my Carly?” shrieked Uncle Harold. “Oh my god, no . . . how . . . when?”

Responding to Uncle Harold’s screams, Cindy became frightened and lost her balance on the shoeshine step stool and fell grasping onto the blade of the shoe cutter that Uncle Harold prepared to use on Cindy’s grandfather’s boots slicing three of her fingers off. Cindy screamed and landed on the floor of the small shop bleeding. Her grandfather, who was outside smoking his tobacco cigarette, heard both Uncle Harold’s and Cindy’s screams and burst into the shop.

“What is all of this shouting and screaming?” He noticed his granddaughter on the floor bleeding and shouted, “CINDAAAYYYYYY! Boy, what have you done to my sweet grandbaby?”

Still in disbelief regarding Aunt Carly, Uncle Harold was unable to focus on the tragic accident. He grabbed his keys to lock up to get home when it occurred to him what had happened to Cindy. He looked at Cindy’s grandfather whose face was accusatory, and Uncle Harold said, “Oh no . . . it was an accident.”

“Accident? You son of a bitch. You cut my grandbaby’s fingers clean off her pretty little hand!” Uncle Harold continued to snatch his things in a confused state.

“Where are you running off to? No, you are going to face the law for this.”

The farmer grabbed Uncle Harold’s right arm and punched him in the face knocking him to the floor and ran out the shop to hail the sheriff and call an ambulance.

Uncle Harold was arrested for first-degree assault. Bail was set at \$50,000 beyond his financial reach, barring Uncle Harold from gaining his freedom to attend Aunt Carly’s funeral. Since Cindy was a child, particularly a white child in the ultraconservative South, he was sentenced to thirty-five years in a Georgia prison. Tracey was all alone at seventeen years old.

Present Day: Later Morning (7:00 am) Day of the Arrest. Night after Meeting Jasper

Tracey brewed a pot of French Roast coffee and turned on the morning show. She pulled out a skirt suit and blouse to wear to work as she listened to the television news. There was a story about a divorced woman whose husband was killed the day after she was awarded their \$15 million mansion in Santa Monica. Tracey sat on a stool in her kitchen, sipped her cup of coffee, and reflected on the night she and her ex-husband Matheson Bodden ended their marriage.

The Year 2002

Tracey married Matheson Bodden, a man she met during graduate school at Duke University in North Carolina. They were in two different academic disciplines; Tracey majored in finance and Matheson in political science. Despite her studies, Tracey was greatly committed to the tenets of the law and democratic government. Matheson and Tracey were members of the democratic debate club and continuously challenged each other, academically and personally. They were enamored and relished in the

intellectual stimulation. Matheson and Tracey married in 1996 and moved to Greensboro, North Carolina.

In the spring of 2002, Matheson and Craig Cambridge pulled into the parking garage at the condominium complex of Tracey and Matheson in Greensboro. The two men were arguing for over forty-five minutes in the car. Matheson slammed the door of his silver Jaguar frustrated. Craig paused but followed behind him.

“Listen, I had a long day,” began Matheson. “The school board has been on my back to increase funding for the computer programs, the sanitation workers may picket against what might be a poisonous site outside of Greensboro, and Tracey is pressuring me to start a family.”

Craig who has a Boston accent asked, “Is she still in Georgia?”

“Yes,” replied Matheson. “She spends more time there than here in North Carolina,” he complained. “But I’ll give her credit though. She remains committed to fighting to free her uncle from prison. He’s been there about ten years now. She’s due back home in a few days.”

Craig and Matheson, both well dressed in Armani suits, walked through the building lobby. Matheson waved at the doorman, and he and Craig proceeded onto the elevator pressing the fourth-floor button. Matheson put the key in his apartment door, held the door open, and Craig walked past Matheson clearly comfortable with his surroundings. Matheson unsuccessfully grabbed Craig’s arm in an attempt to stop him. They continued the disagreement that began in the car.

“Oh, so you’re still upset with me?” Matheson followed Craig into the apartment. Craig walked over to the bar and poured two straight scotches. He swallowed a mouthful of his drink and handed the other drink to Matheson.

“You don’t know who you are,” Craig sharply spouted. “You are a misguided man with nothing left but a woman who does not know you and a conscience that has damaged your judgment.”

Matheson shouted, “How dare you! How DARE you! I have given you nothing but SELF, my trust, my time, my spirit, and, most of all, my heart.

How dare you attempt to bring me down with that guilt mess?"

"You're ashamed of me, of us . . . of yourself. You think your Greensboro, North Carolina, deputy mayor position will be lost if you lived in truth? If city hall revealed who you really are?" Craig removed his suit jacket.

"I am a man! And I do a damn good job at running this city's public affairs," Matheson firmly stated. "Don't be naïve. Although this is the third largest city in North Carolina, this is still the South. They're still trying to understand how a black man was elected to this position. I have to think through the public's eyes."

"Then let's leave YOUR South," Craig sternly suggested.

"This is my life. My career. These people . . . my constituents—" Craig shook his head in dismay. Matheson saw and replied, "You won't understand."

Craig cautiously approached Matheson. "I know who you are. I have been there . . . years ago, but I've been there. I love who you are. You are so concerned about your public image . . . but what about your personal life?"

"I'm a politician, Craig. The public is my life."

Matheson spent his entire life denying his sexuality. As a teenager, he partook in various sports, far too many with only the objective of affirming his masculinity. He attended Christian Academy All-Boys School as a young adult in Rhode Island. During those maturing years, he slowly understood his bisexuality; however, in recent years, his need and love for Craig had escalated, and his desire for a life with his wife had waned. Tracey was unaware of Matheson's bisexuality. Matheson's feelings caused him frustration and confusion leading to anger and resentment for everything Craig represented. But he loved Craig and was in a period of emotional denial.

Over the past two years, Matheson and Craig had connected on many levels. Craig was openly gay yet well received by his friends, family, and colleagues. He was a successful lawyer at his corporate law firm. Matheson found Craig's honesty and openness enviable. Craig was intelligent with a

sharp legal mind, representing well-known wealthy defendants in high-profile criminal cases.

“Stop denying who you are. You have deprived yourself of true happiness for far too long,” Craig stressed.

“Do you have any idea what this would do to my career? Goddammit, what about Tracey? I loved her once.”

“And now WE love each other,” said Craig. “It’s not very different from when you fell in love with her.” Craig realized that he was not persuading Matheson and became angry.

“Stop being a stereotypical faggot!” shouted Craig.

Unlike previous discussions, Matheson became physical violent. He threw his glass of scotch across the room smashing into a Romare Bearden original painting. Matheson angrily grabbed Craig, and they began to wrestle. Matheson pushed Craig to the wall, but Craig was only defensive and refused to hit Matheson. Craig understood the turmoil going on inside Matheson’s mind and chose to remain passive as Matheson sought out a desperate cry for truth. Matheson resented his love for Craig and despised his bisexuality. Matheson pushed Craig around the room some more and became even angrier because Craig would not fight back. Matheson heaved Craig onto the living room sofa and unintentionally broke a fine glass vase on the coffee table. Matheson flipped Craig around and pulled off his own suit jacket. Matheson intended to release his anger by having sex with Craig.

“Is this how you want me? To take out your pain and anger?” asked Craig. Matheson ignored Craig and yanked Craig’s pants to unfasten his belt.

Craig continued, “Is this what our relationship has boiled down to? Meaningless sexual encounters? Be the man you say you are and accept yourself. Accept me. Accept the meaningful lifetime we can build together. Be fair to yourself and to Tracey.”

Craig was disgusted with Matheson’s disregard and simply surrendered. Matheson pulled off his pants, pushed Craig around and grabbed Craig’s

buttocks, and held the couch for leverage as he forcefully penetrated Craig. Matheson continued to pump into Craig harshly. They both moaned in ecstasy from the emotional pain and physical pleasure. Matheson released his anger and held Craig tightly with a dire passion. Craig stood up and looked at Matheson who was clearly emotionally frayed.

“I love you, and I know you are in love with me,” Craig began. “Our time on earth should be filled with flourishing this love together! Openly!”

Craig lovingly held the back of Matheson’s neck and kissed his lips as the door to the condominium opened. Tracey, Matheson’s wife of four years, walked into the room and saw the partially dressed men kissing. She dropped her keys and handbag on the floor as she watched in disbelief. Matheson was startled. He slowly stepped away from Craig, pulled up, and zipped his pants. He walked over to Tracey while he tucked in his shirt. Tracey stood frozen at the door aghast.

“What are you doing back from Georgia so soon?” asked Matheson.

Tracey could not hear his words as she walked farther into her apartment past Matheson. She watched Craig pull up his pants and dress by the couch where he and Matheson had just had sex. Tracey stared at the couch recalling she and Matheson had made love in that same place two nights earlier.

Tracey’s back was toward Matheson as he raised his voice and asked again, “Tracey, you said you were coming home on Saturday. What happened?”

Tracey slowly turned around to face Matheson still in disbelief. Tears fell from her eyes. Matheson saw her disappointment and hurt. They silently looked at each other. Her eyes asked, *How could you do this to me?* Feeling sympathetic, Matheson took a step toward Tracey and stretched his arms in an attempt to console her, but she took two steps backward outside of his reach. She was repulsed by his gesture.

Matheson knew their marriage had ended. For a moment, he unexpectedly felt relieved. The secret was out. Freedom. But then Matheson gradually became aware of the thorny situation he placed everyone. The ramifications of exposing his sexuality slowly started to become apparent in

Matheson's mind. By now, Craig was fully dressed. He too was pretty confident that this inadvertent tryst was the necessary exposure to move Matheson in the right direction and finally end his marriage.

Craig approached Matheson as he was about to leave the apartment and whispered in Matheson's ear, "Call me when you are ready to talk."

Matheson grabbed Craig's arm to stop him from leaving. "No, I want you to stay."

Pleasingly surprised by Matheson's boldness, but wanting to do the right thing, Craig replied, "You have to handle this situation without me here."

"This situation?" Tracey bitterly asked, finally speaking with a low tremor.

Matheson attempted to justify his adulterous behavior. "Tracey, you have not been able to make me happy for a while."

Tracey softly uttered with venomous despise, "Don't you dare hold me responsible."

"This is not about you, Tracey. This is about us," Matheson replied.

"Which 'US'? You and I? Or you and your boyfriend?" she asked.

Craig looked at Tracey's expression and then at Matheson and remarked, "Matheson, I'm going to leave now. I really shouldn't be here."

Matheson reached into his pocket and handed his car keys to Craig. "Wait in the car for me. I'll be right down." Craig left the apartment.

Matheson began to grind his teeth and clenched his lips. His anger visibly elevated as a result of Craig's departure. He needed Craig there for support, but now he had to sever their relationship independently. Tracey's discovery forced Matheson to act. He raced into their bedroom, and Tracey followed behind.

"You lied to me. How could you deceive me in this way?" Tracey shouted with contempt.

“I never lied to you!” Matheson opened his closet, pulled out a black Pullman suitcase and a garment bag, and placed them on the bed.

“Your cheating on me was not a lie?” she asked.

“We never discussed it. I never told you things that were untrue.”

Tracey stood at the bedroom door while Matheson reached into his bureau and pulled out a batch of underwear and socks. He placed them into his suitcase. He reached into his closet and grabbed several suits, shirts, and ties. Matheson remained calm as he packed his belongings.

“Don’t you see? Just because you did not tell me doesn’t make your behavior acceptable.”

“I always treated you well.”

“You were unfaithful to me!”

“This is not about you, Tracey.”

“You disrespected our marriage!”

“Our marriage ran its course.”

Tracey was hurt by Matheson’s disregard and his imminent departure. She started to cry.

“I was a good wife to you. You met me a virgin. I was a good woman to you. I never had any other man but you. I loved you.”

“And once upon a time, Tracey, I loved you too. Listen . . . Tracey . . . my feelings for Craig are not about you. I have to live my life now in the way I always should have done years ago.”

Tracey pleadingly requested, “If we start a family, things will change. You’ll see . . . they will . . . with a son or a daughter, we could have a new beginning. Children will bring the joy to our marriage that we felt in the beginning.”

“This can’t be saved with a child. Besides, Tracey, I am not interested in saving whatever is left of our marriage. As a matter of fact, there isn’t anything left. You are not the person I need in my life. He’s waiting downstairs for me.”

Tracey lost control. “I WON’T LET YOU LEAVE! YOU CAN’T LEAVE ME!” She snatched his suitcase and emptied out the contents onto the floor. She reached for the garment bag to pull out his clothes when Matheson grabbed her arms firmly to stop her.

“Tracey, please, I don’t want this to get physical. I respect you. Don’t destroy the high opinion I have of you.”

Matheson picked up the clothes that were strewn across the floor. He repacked his things. Tracey stood at the bedroom door, blocking the exit. Matheson approached Tracey with his luggage in his arms attempting to exit the room.

Tracey grabbed his garment bag. She pleaded, “Let’s talk this through. I’ve been a good woman to you. I am all you really need.”

“Tracey . . . don’t you see? I’m not leaving you for a woman! You can’t offer me what I yearn for in a relationship.”

Recognizing looming defeat, Tracey dropped Matheson’s bag on the floor and fell to her knees and grabbed his arm.

“I won’t let you go. You can’t leave me!” Tracey cried uncontrollably.

“We owe it to ourselves . . . to our marriage . . . to work on finding happiness. This is not happiness!” he responded.

Matheson walked toward the apartment door. Tracey got up but continued pulling his arm, causing the garment bag to hang from his shoulder.

Tracey cried her words. “We can make this work. It was only an affair. Marriage has its ups and downs. This is just a downtime. I’ll change. I’ll do as you ask. I can be a better wife to you.”

Matheson ignored her appeal. Tracey continued with one last desperate attempt to change his mind. She walked in front of Matheson and looked him directly in the eyes.

“Matheson . . . please. I love you. You are the only man I have ever known. The only husband I could ever want. I have no one. My parents are

dead. My only living relative imprisoned. Please . . . please don't leave me alone."

Matheson pondered for a moment. Tracey would be all alone. Her only family was Uncle Harold who would likely spend the rest of his life in jail. Matheson rested his luggage down and stared in Tracey's eyes. He still loved her and wanted the best for her. She was the ideal wife for any man. The time had finally come to make his choice in life.

"I'll make arrangements to get the rest of my things next week. Good-bye, Tracey." Matheson knew a future failed marriage would be inevitable. He picked up his luggage and exited the apartment.

Tracey was despondent. She closed the door behind him, fell to the floor, and bawled expressing pain from deep within. She banged the floor with her fist crying, "No . . . you can't do this to me! I hate you! I hate you!"

Matheson went downstairs to the parking garage to meet Craig who was waiting in the car sitting in the driver's seat.

Matheson uttered in a low tone, "It was devastating up there. I hurt her. I hurt her terribly."

Craig grabbed Matheson's arm misinterpreting Matheson's words. "What the hell is wrong with you? Did you hit her?"

"No . . . of course, I didn't touch her! What kind of man do you think I am? I just don't know how she will emerge from this. I just . . . I don't know."

"You had to make a decision, Matt. There are no more lies and deception. People would have continued to get hurt. Tracey obviously is already emotionally destroyed."

Matheson felt miserable. "Let's get out of here."

Craig continued as he drove off, "Everything will work out for the best. Believe me, we will be better off. Living openly . . . proudly . . . without shame. You wanted to love her, but you have nothing for her. She too will meet someone and have a much happier life."

“She didn’t deserve this. I hope she will forgive me one day,” Matheson whispered as he looked out the car window as they drove away.

Two weeks later, Tracey moved to the upper east side of New York City to launch the career she had always desired. At thirty-three years old, Tracey became a highly aggressive, spirited businesswoman who shattered the glass ceiling at Dale, Walton & Pierce Investment Bank to become partner within two years. Tracey’s fair skin, shoulder-length dark brown hair, and hazel eyes, coupled with her Wharton Business School MBA in finance, helped sway middle-age white male CEOs into purchasing complex financial products for their companies. Tracey lived in the world of Dale, Walton & Pierce day and night. Although Tracey greatly richened her personal wealth with a \$750,000 annual salary plus million dollar bonus, her spirit was low and in need of enrichment.

Quite expectedly, it was difficult for Tracey to trust anyone; and as a result, she limited her dating to vodka martinis in Manhattan soirées and eventually bimonthly sessions with Jasper. She lived alone in her York Avenue condominium overlooking the East River and rarely entertained in her apartment. Although Jasper had a key to her apartment, she preferred to meet him at neutral locations. Tracey was lonely but hopeful she and Jasper would soon begin the life she dreamt she could have had with Matheson.

Breakfast in Love

Present Day: Day after the Arrest at the Courthouse Jail

A corrections officer approached Jasper in his cell.

“Man, ain’t you that cat I saw on the cover of one of those black businessmen magazines? Damn, what they get on you that you isolated back here with no other prisoners. Listen, brother, anything you need, I got you covered.”

Jasper was worn and tired. It had been thirty hours since his arrest. He had not slept, eaten, or bathed. He could not understand why his wife, Laura, had not come to the jailhouse. He watched the corrections officer walk off, sat on the bench in his cell, and slung his head back. He thought about breakfast with Laura earlier in the week on Tuesday morning.

Two Days before the Arrest

Jasper walked across his cherry mahogany kitchen toward Laura. They shared a seven-thousand-square-foot home on three acres of property. It was a mini mansion with plenty of room for their growing family as Laura was eight months pregnant.

Laura believed in enjoying a high-quality life and making the most of life’s precious experiences over the material possessions that Jasper relished. Laura forfeited a career to become a homemaker. She enjoyed vacations away from Jasper to find seclusion and solace.

Many of her vacations were taken with her good friend Eva. Mauritius was their favorite country located off the southeastern coast of Africa, east of Madagascar. They traveled to Mauritius every six months. They believed the land was filled with mysteries, and they could bond with nature. Laura enjoyed deep-sea fishing for marlin, tuna, and barracuda. The exceptional coral reef and crystal clear waters were of particular interest to both women. Laura and Eva spoke French fluently, connecting easily with the natives of the country.

Laura lived in fear of her personal truths: fear of self, fear of motherhood, and fear of life. Oftentimes, Eva helped Laura find her inner being through solitude, and they bonded significantly over three years. Eva became a crucial positive energy in Laura's life, and Laura looked forward to their conversations, savoring the precious uplifting motivation.

In the beginning, Jasper loved Laura for her family values and spirit. She was dedicated to Jasper's success in an admirable sort of way. Laura believed in storybook relationships, but the story never included a controlling and possessive man who had a mistress whom he refused to leave—a woman who was on his mind when Laura made love with him. A woman who made Jasper come to life. This story was not supposed to exist in Laura's image, but it was her reality.

Laura's family was financially sound. Her father was a retired federal judge who sat on the State Supreme Court in Palo Alto, California, and, later, Washington, D.C., before retiring. After sacrificing her career to raise Laura and her two older brothers, Laura's mother started a career as an art history professor at Howard University in DC where her parents currently reside.

"Good morning, hun," Laura warmly said to Jasper. He lovingly massaged Laura's very pregnant stomach.

"You are a perfect sight. How is my son today?"

"Excited to come into this world. One more month to go."

Jasper touched Laura's stomach. "You look so beautiful."

"I feel enormous. I'm feeling somewhat anxious about the birth."

"My lovely wife, you are going to be remarkable." He kissed her slowly and increasingly intense. She had enough, but he continued to press his mouth against hers.

"OK, Jas. Let me make some breakfast."

"I want you for breakfast." He continued to kiss her harder.

"Um, Jasper. No, I can't. Not today. This baby is making me feel uncomfortable."

“Sweetie, you are so sexy to me.” He grabbed her face in both of his hands and kissed her eagerly. “You are a true woman. You have carried my son in your beautiful body for eight months.” Jasper became overly loving, kissing her neck, cheeks, and forehead.

“OK, Jas. Give me a little air.”

“I just want to show you all the time—”

“Jas, enough for today.” Laura’s voice begins to crack. “Please don’t do this.”

Jasper lifted up Laura and placed her on top of the marble kitchen island. She held the top of his head, and he was bending down to remove her panties.

“We’ll hurt the baby,” she said.

“No, we won’t, Laura. The obstetrician said it was fine up until you give birth. I’ll be gentle. I promise.”

“No, Jas. I really am not—”

“Shhh.” He placed his fingers over her lips. “Don’t deny your husband. You are so beautiful.”

“Thank you. But, Jas . . . no.”

By now, Jasper had Laura at the edge on top of the kitchen island and had slid off her panties. The countertop was cool, so he rubbed Laura’s inner thighs and licked his way to her clitoris that he gently sucked in preparation. The bright sun beamed through the kitchen window onto Jasper’s chest as he slid off his jogging pants and underwear and penetrated his wife. Laura silently shed a tear as she looked over his shoulder but cautioned herself not to allow Jasper to see her emotional pain because she knew it was inappropriate for him to feel guilt. Jasper’s pulse became firmer and stronger, and he no longer was cognizant of his wife’s condition as he closed his eyes and thrust harder and more consistently. Squeezing her tender swollen maternal breasts in his hands, he pulsed harder and harder into Laura’s body totally unaware of his force until Laura shrieked, and simultaneously, the doorbell rang.

“Oh, damn.” Jasper suddenly became aware of what he was doing to his wife. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Laura cried lowly. The bell rang again. Jasper pulled up his pants and went to the door as Laura grabbed her underwear and scurried upstairs to her bedroom. It was the pool maintenance company. It was spring, and the pool company arrived to open their pool.

“Hey, man, I’m here from Horizon Pool Company to open your pool. Are you Mr. Cunningham?”

“Yeah,” Jasper answered as he looked over his shoulder at Laura going up the spiral staircase. “Go around the house to the back. When you’re done, ring the bell.”

Jasper stopped loving Laura but realized love had little to do with the game of life. After closing the front door, he touched his crotch and debated whether he should follow his wife, and he did.

When Jasper arrived upstairs at the bedroom, he looked at Laura who was still crying. She was sitting on the boudoir chair in her bathroom preparing to run a warm bath.

“Laura, why do you cause me to do this to you? Just take it easy. Come on, now you got yourself all upset for no reason. You’re going to get the baby upset. Let me hold you.”

Jasper bent over Laura and hugged her. Coincidentally, her face was near Jasper’s groin as he stood up above her, and he held her head tight against him.

“Let me see your eyes.” He looked down at her. “I am only trying to make you happy, show you my love. OK, I won’t hurt my son.” Laura nodded her head.

With those words, Jasper pulled down his jogging pants again and tapped himself on Laura’s lips.

“OK, baby. Just finish taking care of your husband.”

She was in semidisbelief. She wanted to cry, but there were no tears. So Laura just opened her lips and allowed him into her mouth while he

grabbed her long hair firmly.

“Don’t you love me, Laura? Oh, your lips are so wet, and you are so beautiful.” After a short while, he asked Laura to turn around and bend over the bathtub. Laura obeyed. He forced himself into her body and deeply penetrated her again. The pool boy was right outside, so Jasper covered her mouth with his hands as the pool boy may hear and misinterpret her shrieks for what Jasper believed was her joy. Jasper continued to sexually abuse his wife’s eight-months-pregnant body.

The doorbell rang again.

“Goddamn pool guy,” said Jasper. Jasper pulled up his pants and went downstairs to answer the door. He left Laura in the bathroom lying on the floor crying.

“When will this end? Why can’t I just leave him?” she asked herself.

This was not the first time Jasper had physically or emotionally ill-treated his wife. Laura recalled her first experience of abuse from Jasper.

The Year 2000

Two months after Laura and Jasper were married, Laura’s first cousin Melissa was celebrating her baby’s christening. Laura and Jasper drove to the outdoor affair that was held at Melissa’s country house in the wooded area of Dutchess County upstate New York. They planned to spend the night at a nearby hotel as a weekend getaway after the celebration.

The christening was well attended by over one hundred guests traveling from all across the United States. There was a huge white tent outdoors with caterers tending various buffet-style dishes—carved ham, roast beef, hot and cold pastas—and two cocktail bars on either side. There was a lovely white cake shaped like a holy cross with gold and silver decorations on a center table. A string trio played music in the gardens. Some folks were sitting at tables eating while others were walking around the lovely wooded grounds enjoying the natural scenic environment. The weather was perfect for an outdoor affair. It was early September, and it was still warm with blue skies, and the trees were just beginning to change slightly orange.

The air was fresh and crisp, and you could hear the birds and crickets chirping in the woods.

Laura had few opportunities to be amongst her family in this way. The Brocktons very rarely held family reunions—it seemed everyone was always too busy to plan or partake. So they used events such as weddings, christenings, and funerals as their opportunities to catch up and reminisce. Laura's family was professionals from all disciplines: teachers, lawyers, surgeons, actors, and architects—pick your choice. They all had vibrant career stories to share, and conversations were interesting and exciting across the house. Jasper and Laura walked over to her parents.

“Mother, Daddy.” Laura hugged her parents.

“It's so nice to see you, baby girl,” Mrs. Brockton replied.

“How are you, princess?” asked her father.

“I'm great.”

“Mr. Brockton, it's a pleasure to see you,” said Jasper as he extended his hand.

“Jasper,” Laura's father replied.

“Mrs. Brockton, you are very lovely today,” Jasper remarked as he kissed her on the cheek.

“Thank you, Jasper. How are you doing?”

“I couldn't be better.” He held Laura's hand. “Especially with this angel of beauty.” Laura smiled at Jasper, and they kissed.

“Well, I can see that,” Mrs. Brockton replied.

“Pretty soon we'll be celebrating our own baby christening,” Jasper cheerily announced. Laura's mother looked at Jasper and Laura with her eyes wide open that asked whether or not Laura was pregnant. Laura quickly diffused her mother's thoughts.

“No, nothing to report. We're taking our time.” Laura looked at Jasper somewhat perturbed.

Jasper had been pressuring Laura to become pregnant ever since they returned from their honeymoon. After seeing several of her family and friends divorced within two years of their marriage with toddlers to contend with, Laura was not ready to have a baby this early in her marriage. Although a divorce could occur at any point in a marriage, Laura wanted to grow a solid foundation to support the challenges that would come before introducing a baby. On the other hand, Jasper wanted a son as soon as possible. Therefore, he did not allow Laura to work in preparation for raising a family.

Laura's cousin Melissa walked over with her baby, Natalie, in her arms. Precious Natalie was three months old and dressed in a white silk dress and bonnet. Laura took Natalie and cuddled her.

"Come to Godmother Laura." Laura kissed Natalie on her forehead. "What a good baby you were today."

"The priest also said the same thing," bragged Melissa.

"Yes, indeed she was," said Mrs. Brockton. "And she has her entire family here today to express their love."

"Melissa, how did you manage to get everyone here?" asked Laura. "I'll tell you the truth, I don't think anyone is missing."

"Well, you know I couldn't attend your wedding because I was due to give birth to Natalie any minute. I really wanted to see everyone. After I got your wedding guest list, I just worked on it."

"She is so pretty with those bright eyes," said Mrs. Brockton. "She certainly gets it from our side of the family." They laughed. She reached for baby Natalie from Laura's arms.

"Uncle Mark, I need your legal advice on a matter. One of my clients is undergoing a class action suit by its employees as it relates to discrimination."

"Not my area, but let's talk," answered Laura's father.

Jasper and Laura strolled away from the family and the tent holding hands and chatting playfully. They intermittently looked at each other and

smiled just how newlyweds ought to do. They were clearly in love with each other. Laura wore a soft tan suede wrap dress with low-heeled brown suede knee-high boots that were comfortable for walking. Jasper had on a casual rust-colored suit with an unbuttoned indigo shirt. They continued to walk farther into the country for about twenty minutes well beyond visual distance of Melissa's home.

"Guess what?" Laura teasingly asked.

"Mmm, can't guess," replied Jasper.

"Our two months wedding anniversary is today," said Laura.

"Really? Happy anniversary, Mrs. Cunningham."

"Happy anniversary, Mr. Cunningham." They stopped walking and deeply kissed each other on the lips.

"Let's sit on that boulder," suggested Jasper.

"No way. I am not messing up this dress."

"Then take it off."

"Now you are talking crazy, Jasper."

"I know you're bold enough to do it. There aren't any roads or houses within distance."

Jasper and Laura were in a wooded area. Jasper anxiously removed his jacket and placed it over the flattest portion of the huge boulder. Anxious to engage in lovemaking, he sat down, and Laura stood in front of him.

Unwrapping her dress to reveal her navy blue silk all-in-one teddy, he said, "You are the sexiest woman I have ever seen. How could I not want you every possible moment?" He removed her dress and placed it inside out on the grassy area. Still standing in front of him, she lowered her head to kiss him on the forehead.

"I've never loved any man as much as I love you. I yearn for you every day in every possible way." As Laura spoke, Jasper unsnapped the crotch of her teddy and immediately began to lick her with intensity. Raising her right foot onto his lap, he continued to suck her until she moaned in pleasure as

she grabbed the back of his neck to prevent Jasper from pausing. They switched places with Laura sitting on the boulder and Jasper standing in front of her. She unzipped his pants, pulled down his underpants, and he popped out fully erect ready for action. The warmth of the fresh country air and the birds chirping in the woods drove her affection as she embraced him with her hands and devoured him in her mouth.

“Come to me, Laura. I want you so much. Let me make love to you. Stand up.”

Jasper put one of his legs on the boulder for balance and lifted Laura. Both of her legs were wrapped around his waist, and he gently penetrated his wife.

“Oh, my love,” said Laura. Strong and muscular, Jasper held up Laura as they kissed and passionately made love uninhibitedly shouting with echoes in the woods. Laura reached orgasm, and without pausing, Jasper continued to make love to her.

“My beautiful loving wife. Let’s have a baby. Right now. I’m going to come inside of you, my love.”

“Jasper . . . no . . . don’t.” And she started to push him away.

“What? You are my wife. Don’t you want a family? My children?”

“Of course I do. But not now.” Jasper put Laura down.

Jasper grew angry. “What? Then when?”

“Jasper, what are you asking?”

“What do you mean, what am I asking?”

Laura was confused with Jasper’s demeanor and said, “I’m not ready to have children.”

Jasper was fuming by now. “Why the fuck did you marry me for then?”

“We spoke about this. Not until we are both ready and spent some time living as a married couple. Come on. There is nothing for you to get so hostile about.”

“HOSTILE?? HOSTILE!! Oh, so you think I’m being hostile for wanting to make love to my wife, for wanting to come inside of my wife, for wanting to start a family?”

Jasper got dressed. He was enraged that the lovemaking session had ceased.

“Now you are taking everything out of context.” Laura put on her dress.

“Oh, so I’m overexaggerating now? Why must you be so anti-baby?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Laura.

“Anytime I raise the subject, you become repulsed. Goddammit, Laura, you’re my wife. I want to have children.”

“And I said not now!”

“What the hell do you mean YOU said? Do you think you’re running this marriage? That you are controlling ME? That you say when I am going to have a child and when I’m not?”

“You keep taking my words and twisting them into your own. STOP DOING THAT!” she shouted.

“Laura, stop telling me what to do!” said Jasper.

“And you can’t control what I say and when I say it,” replied Laura.

“Oh yeah. Is that what you think?” Jasper bit his bottom lip. His eyes were flaming red. Jasper swung his hand back and slapped Laura in the mouth to her surprise.

Jasper yelled, “You think I CAN’T control that mouth? Sure I can. I can control that mouth and that ass. Take off your dress.”

Laura held her bleeding lip and, in a low voice, asked, “What? What did you say?”

“Take the fucking dress off now!”

In fear and disbelief, Laura removed her dress as Jasper watched in anger. He was foaming at the mouth. Laura wasn’t moving fast enough, so Jasper helped her. He tore the snaps off her teddy. He threw his jacket on

the ground and laid her down. He unzipped his pants and pushed himself inside of her. Laura began to cry. He pushed harder and harder in anger grinding inside of her, thrusting himself back and forth. The friction hurt Laura, and she shrieked in pain. Jasper released a moan and deliberately ejaculated inside of Laura.

“You bastard!” Laura whispered as Jasper rose from on top of her.

In a matter-of-fact manner, Jasper pointed his finger at Laura and replied, “That is my pussy and my mouth. You belong to ME, Laura. Don’t fucking forget it. Now stop your foolishness, get dressed, and come on, let’s get back to the house.”

“What about my lip? It’s swollen. Everyone will see it.”

“Just tell them you fell and landed on a stub while we were walking in the woods.”

They silently walked back to the christening. On their way back, she thought about the first time she had met Jasper at a fund-raiser in New York City. He was not the man she now knew.

The Year 1999

In spite of the dozens of well-dressed women at the Executive Club’s Christmas celebration, Jasper focused on the exquisite beauty standing on the opposite side of the room. A strikingly elegant woman whom he concluded would be his wife stood chatting with two older men. Laura was five feet seven inches, dark-skinned, and strikingly beautiful. She wore a simple black cocktail dress and a single strand of pearls. Her hair was in an upsweep, accentuating her beautiful straight nose, long neck, and almond-shaped dark brown eyes. Jasper sat on a sofa with legs crossed and took pleasure watching Laura from a distance. As she drank a glass of white wine, her sophistication radiated. Her gracefulness was exciting and her mannerisms exceptional. The two older men Laura spoke with both walked away leaving her alone. Jasper approached Laura.

“Good evening,” said Jasper.

“Good evening,” replied Laura.

“I’m Jasper. Jasper Cunningham.”

“I’m Laura Brockton. It’s a pleasure.”

“Forgive my forwardness, but I noticed your companions had stepped away.”

“Oh, yes. Attorneys Watkins and Stern. They are former clerks for my father.”

“Your father? Is he a judge in New York?”

“A retired judge . . . in Washington, D.C.”

“Is that where you hail from?”

“Hail,” Laura chuckled. “I grew up in Palo Alto, California. My father accepted a judgeship in DC when I was twelve. Outside of my schooling at Wellesley, I have lived there since.”

“And you are here tonight because . . .”

“The gentlemen who you saw me with earlier insisted that I join them tonight as I am in New York City to Christmas shop.”

“I would love to speak with you more. When do you leave New York?”

“First thing in the morning.”

“The music is calming, sit with me.”

Laura and Jasper sat on the patio terrace and shared backgrounds. They were from two extremely different upbringings, but their personalities connected immediately. Laura laughed so hard at Jasper’s wit and perceived honesty in his stories, a laughter she never quite knew existed in her soul.

Jasper asked Laura whether he could escort her back to her hotel. She was staying at the Marriott Marquis. They walked across town as there weren’t any taxicabs available. It began to snow lightly, and they enjoyed the cool winter freshness in the air.

“I did not see the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center,” Laura admitted. “I shopped right past it.”

“Then we are headed to the tree.” They both laughed and headed toward Rockefeller Center.

When they arrived, they were drawn into the romantic spirit of the evening and the lights.

“Can you ice-skate?” asked Jasper.

“I was the 1980 Cotton Puff ice-skating champion in Palo Alto middle school.”

“In California?” he asked cynically.

“That is correct,” she smiled.

“Those are indoor man-made ice rinks.”

“Ice is ice.”

“Miss Laura Brockton, will you ice-skate with me tonight in NYC in the snow outdoors on genuine ice?”

“Mr. Jasper Cunningham, I certainly shall.”

After an hour of playful ice-skating, they resumed walking to Laura’s hotel. As they arrived at the hotel lobby, Laura turned and smiled at Jasper. Laura was attracted to Jasper’s charisma, striking presence, and humor. Laura had not made love to a man before. She had two sexual relationships with women in her life, but she knew she wanted a lifelong relationship with a man and never considered herself a lesbian.

“I had a lovely evening, Jasper Cunningham.”

“Laura Brockton, I look forward to seeing you and speaking with you again. However, right now, I look forward to kissing you.”

Jasper gently kissed Laura’s lips. She smiled, and while her heart wanted to invite him up to her suite, her upbringing as a debutante and the daughter of a federal judge inspired her to turn and walk to the elevator alone.

Jasper was so intrigued by her purity that he knew Laura was to be his wife.

The Accounting

Present Day: Day after the Arrest at the Courthouse Jail

The corrections officer returned to Jasper's cell.

"Hey, man, I hear there is a special retired judge who is coming here to review your case. They are waiting for him to fly in from Washington, D.C."

"Really. Does this judge have a name?" Jasper asked.

"I'm sure he has a name, but no one is saying. Who the hell did you fuck with? FBI wants a piece of your ass, I heard the Ignacio family has half a million dollars for your head, and the assistant DA is considering adding a conspiracy to commit murder charge."

"What the hell . . . murder?" Jasper lost his composure. He grabbed the cell bars. He was unable to speak with Antonio Ignacio when he was initially arrested. He realized it was too late. The wheels were already in motion. He stopped and bent his head down. After a few seconds, Jasper calmed down and asked, "Sir, what is your name?"

"Officer Williams."

"Officer Williams, I have not had an opportunity to call my wife when I was first brought in here in what is going on two days now. I have not heard anything. I was supposed to call my attorney." Jasper now has strong desperation in his voice. "I have not been afforded an opportunity to reach out to either. You know who I am. I am a wealthy man, and you said anything I need you'd help take care of for me. Do me a favor and call my wife. I'll give you her number. Call my attorney. His law office is Edwards, Edwards & Cloise. His name is Phillip Cloise. He is listed."

"Man, you asking for a tall order. Word has it your ass is toast. I'll reach out if I can."

Jasper sat back on his cell bench in disbelief. He wondered, *What the hell is going on? Conspiracy to commit murder? What did FBI Agent*

Lawson do? That prick didn't afford me an opportunity to further negotiate. Jasper looked out his cell window. How could this be?

Jasper reminisced on the day of his arrest moments before the FBI agents arrived.

The Morning of the Arrest

Tracey and Jasper sat in Jasper's fiftieth-floor office facing the windows that overlooked Manhattan's East River.

"Jasper, you know I love you. What you ask is more than I can handle," said Tracey.

"I am not going to spend the rest of this life without what's important to me." Jasper looked at Tracey sternly. "You are my life."

"How are we going to stage this?"

"Laura is due in less than four weeks, and my son will be born into this world. She is scheduled to deliver in Mercy Hospital, and a simple visit to her room can mean a lifetime together. As we discussed, when you visit Laura, tell her you are my family member, my cousin from Memphis that happened to be in town. You're related to Annette, my mother. There will be a small jar of crushed sleeping pills hidden in the side zipper of her overnight bag. When she is distracted, simply empty about half into her drink, and she will doze off. From there, place a pillow over her nose and mouth, and she will rest easily."

"Oh, dear god, Jasper. I cannot be part of this."

"Listen, Tracey. It's the only way. I love you, and I've always loved you," Jasper said calmly.

"Stop making it sound so . . . uneventful. I am not a murderer. Jasper, there is never a perfect crime, there certainly is never a perfect murder. I have far too much to lose. Be sensible. Divorce Laura and seek custody of your son. Use your power and influence in this city." Tracey rose and firmly stated, "Let your legal connections work for you, goddammit!"

"Work for me?" Jasper sarcastically questioned.

“Yes. What about Harold Simmons? Justice Smalls?”

“Are you crazy, Tracey? Do you want an investigation of my affairs? Smalls will be up my ass in minutes making a name for himself if he even smells the notoriety I could offer his career. You want me to be a convict? Destitute?”

“Your financial affairs mean absolutely nothing to me. I have my own money.”

Jasper rubbed his temple. “Your wealth is meaningless compared to my empire, lady. My affairs keep those diamond necklaces on your long skinny neck.” Tracey was appalled with his remark. He rubbed his temple more and regained composure. “Tracey, I want us to be a family.”

“Not this way.”

Jasper lost composure again and shouted, “You barren bitch. You are the reason why we must do this. You married that sexually promiscuous fuck and let him scar you, infect your tubes irreparably, not me. You know you can’t conceive my son. Yet I still want you. I love you. I gave you—”

“Oh my god,” Tracey cried. “I can’t believe . . .” Tracey is numb. She was terrified of the man she saw before her. She had never known this man. She got up to leave.

Jasper scurried behind her.

“Tracey, no, I’m sorry. I am totally too stressed. I have a lot going on. There is too much on my mind at the moment,” Jasper confessed.

“Tracey, look, the SEC is heavily interested in the affairs of my firm. Shit, this could bring my entire organization down,” Jasper said defeated. “Increasing these troubles are several audits we are in the process of completing for Ignacio Industries. Funds of the subsidiary companies are being channeled to the personal accounts of Antonio Ignacio. He defrauded investors of billions over the past several years, and this firm has looked the other way.”

“So you are going to add murder to your portfolio of misdeeds? Are you insane?”

They paused and looked at each other. A deafening silence overcame the room. Jasper's wife, Laura, walked into the office. They were unaware that she had been listening to the entire conversation from outside his partially opened office door. Laura behaved as though nothing was wrong.

"Jasper?" said Laura.

Tracey picked up her purse and said, "Hello, Mrs. Cunningham. I'm Tracey Bodden." Tracey extended her hand, and Laura did not acknowledge Tracey.

Tracey nervously continued, "Cunningham, Gates & Waddell handle my investment banking clients." Tracey looked at Jasper. "Mr. Cunningham, it seems as though your hands are beyond full at the moment. I'm sure the last thing you need to address are these quarterly financial statements." Tracey lifted a batch of files from Jasper's desk. Laura watched Tracey as she exited the office.

"What was going on in here?" asked Laura.

"Tracey is the investment banker on many of the client deals that I represent. Why? What are you thinking?"

"JASPER, YOU WERE PLANNING TO KILL ME!"

"Laura, calm down. Stop overreacting. That's not what you heard."

"I KNOW WHAT I HEARD. YOU WERE PLANNING TO SET UP A LIFE WITH THAT WOMAN. IS SHE YOUR WHORE?"

"Laura, lower your voice. Can we discuss this?"

"DISCUSS? JASPER, DO YOU HEAR WHAT YOU ARE SAYING?"

Jasper and Laura heard shouting and crying down the office hallway. They paused to listen to what was going on. Employees were reacting to the events transpiring with the FBI on the lower floors. Jasper's telecom beeped. He walked over and pressed the button to answer.

"Jeanette, what's going on out there?"

"Mr. Cunningham, there are men in the offices with guns. It is unclear who they are and what they want."

Laura shrieked, "Men with guns?"

"Where are they now?" asked Jasper.

"They are on the floor below," Jeanette replied.

"Thanks, Jeanette." Jasper was calm but had a sense of urgency in his voice. "Laura, now is not the time to discuss this. You heard nothing. I have other matters to address right now." Jasper walked over to hug Laura, and she started wildly swinging her arms to hit him.

"Back off! Don't come near me!" Laura shouted. "Don't touch me!" she cried uncontrollably. "Where is the love and support and caring you promised me for a lifetime four years ago? How could you do this to me? And our baby? Our baby? You and your whore?" Laura marched to the door. "I'm going to the police!" She swung open the office door to leave, but Jasper intercepted and slammed the door closed before she was able to exit.

"LET ME OUT!" They struggled at the door. "I've done nothing but given you everything you asked of me. I never complained about the horrible way you treated me. Not once, you son of a bitch!" They continued to struggle as she attempted to leave the office. "Love, honor, and obey. I loved you. I even obeyed you. I was faithful to you. And you . . . What did you ever do for me? What happiness did you ever bring me? You bastard. Who is she? Who are you for that matter? What trash did I marry? The naysayers were all right about you. You are an untrustworthy snake. You betrayed me. You betrayed me in the worst way." She touched her stomach. "Our son. Oh god, I would have never known my son. YOU BASTARD!" Laura was hysterical punching and kicking Jasper who tried to contain her. Jasper attempted to grab her arms to control her, but it was difficult. Jasper accidentally hit Laura in the abdomen.

"Oh god," she cried and bent over in pain. She held her pregnant belly.

"Laura, what have you caused . . . what have you done?" The intercom was beeping nonstop. Jasper ran over to his desk to answer.

"Mr. Cunningham, I just got word from Mr. Waddell's assistant that the men with guns are headed up the stairwell to our floor." He released the

intercom and went over to Laura. He firmly held both of her arms and looked her in the eyes.

“Stop talking insane about going to the police with what you THINK you heard.” Laura tried to break free from Jasper’s grip. “Stop it. Stop it now,” Jasper urged. Laura remained still. “Laura, calm down. You have to leave now. I don’t want you here.” Jasper walked back to his desk and pressed the intercom.

“Jeanette, tell Henry to bring the car out front. Mrs. Cunningham is coming downstairs now, and he is to take her home immediately.”

“KISS MY ASS, YOU BASTARD! I DON’T NEED YOU TO TELL ME WHERE I SHOULD GO OR HOW I SHOULD GET THERE! IT ENDS NOW, JASPER! IT’S OVER! I’M GOING TO THE POLICE. I WANT A DIVORCE, I HATE YOU!”

Jasper lost his patience with Laura coupled with the added pressure of his unknown armed guests who were on their way. He attempted to speak to her calmly.

“You’re being emotional, Laura. You don’t know what you heard. Go home now.”

“YOU WERE PLOTTING TO KILL ME FOR CHRIST’S SAKE! YOU SHOULDN’T BE WALKING THE STREETS NOR SHOULD YOUR WHORE WOMAN!”

Jasper strongly urged, “Laura, things will be difficult in my office very shortly. For the benefit of our unborn son, please leave.”

Laura dashed for the doorknob, and he allowed her to leave. Although Jasper understood the importance of easing Laura’s concerns, he couldn’t focus on her at this moment. His firm was under siege. As Laura left distraught, Jasper heard the men coming up his private staircase. He didn’t know whether or not his life was in danger. Believing they were underworld hit men coming to kill him, Jasper walked over to his desk to ensure his .38 caliber was loaded. He put it in his hip pocket and walked over to his office window and waited. He wished he had never met his underworld connections—the Ignacio family.

The Year 2001

Over three years earlier, Paul Ignacio sat in his office at his iron and steel firm outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan. The plant covered about ten acres in the middle of green fields and open space. The Ignacios employed over four hundred local laborers to produce iron, steel, and other metal parts that were sold to various companies in the automotive, cycling, and appliance businesses. Paul reviewed his financial books and was somewhat discontent with the success of his business.

Paul migrated from Bogota, Colombia, in 1965 at fifteen years old with his parents. They were hardworking immigrants without a high school education. They lived in Detroit, Michigan, where his father secured factory work in a small automotive plant. Within ten years, his father became foreman of the plant and purchased a modest home for their family. Paul, however, had loftier goals than his father's success. As a teenager, Paul joined the Salinas crime family and committed a host of felonies and misdemeanors from petty theft to first-degree murder but was never arrested. His Colombian gang members thought of him as a blessing and most requested that Paul accompany them on jobs for good luck. Over the years, Paul accumulated enough money to set up his own iron steel works business as a front for his international drug and diamond smuggling operation.

Paul's thoughts were interrupted by his six feet two inches dark-haired son, Antonio, who entered the room. Antonio customarily dressed like a Wall Street business executive with a dark gray pin-striped suit and wing-tipped shoes. He was in his midthirties, extremely handsome, but short-tempered.

"Poppy, you need to fire Lucy! She is never at her desk."

"Relax, Antonio. You are always ready to fire someone. Remember this is MY company."

"Yes, I know. But it won't be much of a company very long if you don't take the business public in the stock market like I have been saying to you for two years now."

“Are you back on that again?”

“You need to bring fresh investments into the company. The ways in which you operated business years ago are no longer viable to meet market demands and shelter your personal assets. You can’t keep putting your personal finances at stake. Not to mention, if this company goes down, how the hell are you going to explain the jets and homes you have from your other endeavors? This company needs to be positioned as profitably as possible.”

Paul whispered to Antonio, “There is no way, no fucking way in hell I want to start opening my company to outsiders, the SEC and investors. It will no longer be my company. It will be their company. I need to do business my way and my way only.”

“You can still do business your way, Poppy. As chairman of the company, you would hold the top seat.”

“I sent you to the finest business schools to help me run my affairs. Instead of coming back home, you go work on Wall Street to make strangers rich. Did you think of me? Then when they chewed you to the bone and tossed your ass in the gutter, you came back here. I embraced you. You are a smart man. But don’t come to me anymore talking about mergers and stock offerings. **THIS IS MY COMPANY, AND IT WILL STAY THAT WAY!** Do you hear me? Now get the fuck out of my office with your public company bullshit!”

Antonio walked out of his father’s office furious. It was the last time he was going to be treated that way by him. This business would be his one day, and he intended for that to be sooner rather than later.

Three days later, Antonio called his former Wall Street buddy Jasper Cunningham. Antonio and Jasper began their careers together working for the largest merger and acquisition consulting firm in the world, Williams and Watts. Antonio knew he could trust Jasper in working through his needs.

“Jasper, it’s Antonio Ignacio.”

“Antonio. Hey, a voice from the past. How have you been? What are you up to these days?”

“I pulled out of the Wall Street life, and I’m now chief financial officer of my father’s iron and steel business near Grand Rapids, Michigan.”

Jasper thought how boring that must be. He looked at his watch as he was running late for an important client meeting.

“Fantastic. Life must be good,” Jasper replied.

“It is. It is. I’m married. Two girls, Lucia and Teresita, four and six. How about you?”

Jasper was growing a bit irritated as he wanted people who seemed to call out of the blue to get to the point right away. Everybody always wanted something, he thought.

“Still looking for the right one. Can’t seem to find someone crazy enough to deal with me,” said Jasper. Antonio laughed.

“Jasper, I have a business proposition for you. I’d like you to do some work for my family’s business.”

Jasper did not immediately reply. While he was keen on expansion, he questioned how profitable a Midwest iron and steel company would be to his firm.

“Jasper, are you there?”

“Yes, yes, sorry, my assistant just gave me some papers to sign,” he lied. “Can you elaborate?”

“We’re thinking of going public in the stock market and buying two smaller steel firms to build our infrastructure and outreach. Why don’t you fly out next Thursday about 2:00 pm to meet me, and we’ll talk more specifically.”

Jasper paused again. Would this be worth his time? But then he reflected on an incident years back when Antonio helped him with pricing a stock deal that could have cost Jasper his job if Antonio hadn’t corrected Jasper’s financial estimates. Jasper knew he owed him.

“Hold on. Let me check my calendar.” Jasper put Antonio on hold and pressed the telephone intercom. “Jeanette, what does my calendar look like on the afternoon of Thursday the twelfth? I need to fly out to Michigan.”

“You have an underwriting deal with Kellogg fund investors in Boston.”

“Aw, dammit. Listen, have Jonathan attend in my place. Is his calendar free?”

“Yes, it is, sir.”

“Great, thanks.” Jasper put Antonio back on the line. “Antonio, I’m all set. I’ll be out there next Thursday.”

“I look forward to seeing you, Jasper.”

The following Thursday, Jasper flew out from LaGuardia Airport to Michigan to Ignacio Industries. He rented a car when he arrived and drove to their business location. The company grounds were well-manicured with maple and weeping willow trees. A five-story glass corporate office building was in the front with the address One Steel Drive. Jasper thought how cute and quaint a location. He just wanted to get in, do Antonio the favor, and head back to New York, where the real action was, as soon as possible.

After the security guard buzzed Jasper into the building, an assistant led him to Antonio’s office. The halls were modern contemporary with silver and black furniture and dark hardwood floors throughout. He entered Antonio’s office. It was extremely new wave. There was a built-in stereo system and flat-screen television. He had a separate adjacent entertainment room with a fully stocked bar, leather and mahogany barstools, and contemporary couches.

“Jasper!”

“Antonio.” The two men hugged.

“How long has it been? Seven, eight years?” asked Antonio.

“More like eleven years.”

“How was the flight?”

“Not bad at all.”

“Thank you so much for coming out. I’m sure this is not your usual Manhattan client deal.”

“I didn’t grow my partnership from judging clients by their location.” Jasper smiled.

After reminiscing about their early days on Wall Street, the men spoke of opportunities to make Ignacio Industries a public company on the stock market and, second, how to target acquiring two major competitors in Indiana. Jasper estimated the financial potential to Cunningham, Gates & Waddell to approximate \$2 million—not overly significant, but profitable.

After they discussed the proposals for about four hours, Jasper had gathered sufficient information to understand the strategy and goals of the company.

“Here’s how we will proceed. I will need the company’s financial statements for the past five years, bank statements for the past two years, and access to books and records as we deem necessary. I’ll have my senior auditors begin working on certifying your financial statements as soon as you can have those documents compiled. After the financial statements are certified, I’ll bring in my valuation team to begin pricing the deal.”

“Sounds good.” The men shook hands.

“I thought for certain your father would be here today,” Jasper remarked.

“No, he’s actually traveling to Africa.”

“Africa?”

“South Africa to be exact.”

“Really? On business?”

“Everything to my father IS business.” They laughed. But Jasper sensed that Antonio’s evasiveness had more meaning, but he did not pursue further.

“So where are you staying tonight?” asked Antonio.

“I actually have a 10:00 pm flight back to New York.”

“Nonsense. Come stay with my family tonight and catch an early shuttle in the morning.”

“It’s really quite all right. I didn’t even bring a suitcase.”

“Listen, my home is a mansion,” Antonio bragged. “We’ll not only find you a bed, but a pair of underwear too.”

“You got damn show off.” The men laughed.

“We have a fantastic chef on staff. Tonight is Thursday? Are you in the mood for baby lamb chops with garlic roasted red skin potatoes and spinach in fresh garlic?”

“OK, I’m there.”

“I’ll bring my car up front, and you can follow me there. It’s about twenty minutes away.”

Jasper entered his rented Lexus and followed Antonio who drove a Hummer. They pulled up to a huge brick mansion. Jasper realized Antonio wasn’t kidding about his home. There was a gate with a uniformed security guard at the entrance. Jasper found it to be highly protected—in fact, his curiosity grew about the nature of the supposed iron and steel company and the family’s ties to South Africa. They pulled up to a driveway area that had several luxury cars parked including a Mercedes Benz and Porsche.

The home was lavish. He later learned the house was twenty thousand square feet with a 1,500-square-foot pool and a tennis court on the nine-acre grounds. The sun had set, but the bright airy parlor with glistening white marble floors mimicked daylight.

A Philippine woman greeted the men. She took their briefcases and escorted Jasper to his room on the second floor. Jasper entered an enormous bedroom with high tray ceilings and a private bathroom. He thought, *Hell this is the life. There is no way their iron and steel company is yielding this type of return. And to think I presumed far less.*

The blinds were drawn, and he looked out to see a lit garden area. Antonio was outside having a cocktail and talking to three broad-shouldered men each standing at least six feet four inches and 270 pounds.

They wore double-breasted shiny suits, and their shoes were not corporate attire. Jasper opened the window to attempt to hear what they were saying. Antonio was upset and pointed in the face of one of the men who stood in front of Antonio with his arms folded across his chest unmoved. The men were getting louder and heated in their conversation when Jasper heard Antonio angrily say that his father better not whine about what was right for his family's future. Jasper attempted to listen more intently when someone knocked on his bedroom door.

"Mr. Cunningham?" It was the Philippine woman.

"Yes."

"Mr. Antonio would like for you to join him for a drink on the back patio before dinner is served."

"Sure. Tell him I'll be there in ten minutes."

Jasper opened the closet; and there were several suits, khaki pants, and shirts hanging on the rack in various sizes. There was also a selection of silk ties. The dresser draw contained packs of brand-new undergarments and pajamas. He entered the bathroom to reveal a five-star hotel-like décor. After washing his hands and face, Jasper joined Antonio downstairs.

"Is your room comfortable?"

"Antonio, you are incredible. You've done well."

"Thanks, Jasper. What can I get you?"

"Vodka on the rocks with lime."

Antonio poured Jasper's drink.

"Here is to a newly forming profitable business relationship that will flourish for years to come. Cheers," said Antonio.

"Cheers."

Two months into the audit of Ignacio Industries, one of Jasper's staff members brought to his attention that it appeared hundreds of thousands of dollars were missing from various cash accounts. Furthermore, hundreds of thousands of dollars of investment securities, stocks, and bonds that the

company supposedly owned could not be substantiated. Jasper asked his staff member to leave the information with him. The Ignacios' extravagant lifestyle had become clearer to Jasper. He called Antonio to request a meeting in person. Jasper flew out to Michigan the next morning and met Antonio at his office.

"Antonio, what's been going on here in your company?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't fucking play games here, Antonio. You know what I am referring to. There are literally millions of dollars worth of assets that are reported on Ignacio Industry's books and records that are missing."

Antonio took a deep breath. It was time to allay Jasper's concerns of impropriety. He stood up and said, "Jasper, come with me to have a drink."

They entered Antonio's entertainment room adjacent to his office.

"What would you like?"

"Vodka on the rocks—" said Jasper.

"With lime," said Antonio, smiling since he had remembered.

Antonio poured a straight whiskey for himself.

"Cheers," said Antonio. The men toasted. Jasper heard Antonio's office door open in the adjacent room but could not see who had entered. Jasper sat on the couch while Antonio remained standing with his glass in his hand. Antonio reached for a cigar from behind the bar.

"Do you smoke?" asked Antonio.

"No."

"Do you mind?"

"Of course not."

Antonio lit a cigar and paced the room.

"Jasper, we worked very hard on Wall Street in our day."

"Yes, we sure did."

“Ninety—one hundred hour weeks. Traveling the globe, Hong Kong, Tokyo, and Europe. We learned a lot though. How to value companies, predict the stock market, estimate how much investors will pay for a company, and speculate on deals.”

“Yes, the fun days,” remarked Jasper. Jasper was not in any mood to travel down memory lane.

“Don’t forget the business relationship side. NO deal was insurmountable when you knew your allies, knew your adversaries, and priced it accordingly.”

“That’s right.” Jasper tried to conceal his discomfort, particularly wondering who had entered the adjacent room.

“Jasper, everybody has a price.” Jasper concluded where Antonio was going and chose not to respond.

“Jasper, have you ever wondered why I left the Wall Street game?”

“Quite frankly, Antonio, I didn’t. None of us could stand it very long. It seemed like a logical, healthy career choice that many of us made.”

“Yeah, but I totally left. Jasper, I have four homes in the U.S., two villas in Europe, and one in the Caribbean. I own a yacht and a sailboat. I drive many cars—just name a luxury make, and it’s in one of my garages. I’m married with a beautiful wife. But I have many women to choose from.”

“What’s your point, Antonio?” Jasper asked annoyed.

“Don’t get irritated with me,” Antonio slightly raised his voice. He puffed on his cigar. “There is more to playing this game than you could ever imagine. How much does your pencil-pushing firm gross each year?”

“Don’t worry about my partnership’s finances. We do well.”

“Well? Is WELL good enough? You do WELL. I have WEALTH, Jasper.”

Jasper was silent.

“Come on, Jasper. You’re a professional genius who could latch onto an opportunity that could skyrocket your success in more ways than you ever

imagined. My family can offer you business opportunities that would generate millions, for you, personally.”

Jasper swallowed his drink in one swoop and stood up. He buttoned his suit jacket. He was ready to leave. “Antonio, thank you for considering me to work with your company. But my firm is not in a position to continue work for Ignacio Industries. Tomorrow, I’ll have your books and records FedEx-ed back to your offices.” Jasper exited into Antonio’s office where there were three men. He recognized the same two burly men from Antonio’s home during his last visit standing by the door. The other man sat in Antonio’s executive chair. He later learned it was Paul Ignacio. By the look on their faces, they had heard Antonio and Jasper’s conversation. It was clear to Jasper that the scenario was troublesome. Antonio scurried behind him. He had requested that his men join them; however, Antonio had not anticipated that his father would be there.

“Poppy, what are you doing here? I told you to stay out of this.”

“Stay out of this?” asked Paul. “I didn’t even know what was going on. When were you going to tell me? I have to learn about this from Lorenzo and George?”

Antonio looked at Lorenzo and George with despise. They had betrayed him. Antonio wanted his father left out of the affairs with Jasper. Paul continued, “It sounds to me like you can’t get your shit together. I told you this whole idea was fucking ridiculous. You wanted to take a stranger into my company and open up my books to the world behind my back? What the hell is wrong with you? I worked my ass off to get where I am today. Who the fuck are you, Antonio? What have you done in this company to make a mark for yourself?”

Antonio shouted, “This was going to be my mark!” Antonio is clearly embarrassed in front of Jasper, in particular, as well as the other men. “What the hell do you know? Your backward ways won’t move us into the millennium. You don’t even have a fucking education!”

Paul jumped up and walked over to Antonio and slapped him in the face. Antonio grabbed his father and put him in a headlock. Lorenzo and George grabbed Antonio and held him down on the desk.

Paul spat in Antonio's face and shouted, "You ungrateful son of a bitch! You are not my son! You are just a goddamn bad sperm that jerked out of me! You know nothing about running your own business. Creating something from nothing. Everything was given to you. You goddamn jackass." Paul punched Antonio in the jaw as the two men held Antonio down. Jasper stood on the other side of the room in fear. Paul kicked Antonio in the groin.

"You are no son of mine. You are a coward and louse. All that you own is mine, and I will take it back. You can't even make a son to carry the family name!" Paul walked away and sat back in Antonio's executive leather chair. "Let him go. That fucking spineless punk."

Lorenzo and George released Antonio who was physically hurt and humiliated. Even worse, however, he knew his father would take away his wealth and future financial pipeline. Antonio was raging mad. He anticipated this moment would come sooner or later, and he needed to act now. Antonio reached into the back of his pants and pulled out a .38-caliber gun. With deep-heated anger, he quickly walked up to his father and shot him between the middle of the eyes before Lorenzo and George could stop him. His father fell back on the floor in the chair.

"Who's the fucking punk now?" said Antonio to his father's dead body. He shot him again in the head.

Jasper was petrified. He had never seen a man killed before. He wasn't sure what would happen next.

George said, "Antonio, you are fucking crazy!"

Antonio drew the gun at George and shot him in the stomach. He fell down bleeding to death. Lorenzo was silent and sweating.

"Lorenzo, do you see anything wrong here?"

"Antonio, you are the boss. George was the one who told Paul. That wasn't my business. I work for you."

"You are full of shit! What should I do to you for siding with them? Holding me down? For what's rightfully mine?"

Antonio paused and looked Lorenzo in the eyes.

“Call your boys, clean up my office. Get rid of these sons of bitches. Jasper, come with me.”

“What? Are you insane?” asked Jasper.

Antonio cocked his gun, aimed it at Jasper, and sternly replied, “Who the fuck are you now? A witness? Move your ass.”

They walked to the back exit of the building and scurried to the parking lot.

“Come on, we’re going in my car,” said Antonio.

“Listen, I’m catching a plane to New York. You’re not leaving my car here.”

“Get in my fucking car now, Jasper, and drive. Let’s not ruin your trip.”

“What . . . are you going to shoot me too?”

“Jasper, I have little patience and no time.”

Jasper stared in Antonio’s eyes. This was not the man he knew. The man he worked with side by side for years. This man had become a violent criminal, and the circumstances here were beyond financial affairs. One man’s greed had brought him to execute his own father. Money had become more important than the person who gave him life, who nurtured him to become a man. Jasper thought, when does a person cross the demarcation line where the desire for wealth and power could drive them to kill? In business, there are financial wars daily. But when does one become Antonio? Murders had occurred. He was a witness to these crimes and was concerned that he might be deemed an accomplice, particularly since his rented car was left at the scene.

Jasper entered the driver’s seat of Antonio’s car.

“Give me the key,” Jasper said. Antonio handed the keys to Jasper.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Drive south to I-95. I’ll direct you from there.”

“Where are we going, Antonio?”

“You’ll know soon enough.”

The men drove for approximately forty minutes to a remote location. There were abandoned warehouses in the otherwise deserted surroundings. It was windy, and dust flew through the air.

“Pull up near the building to your left.” Jasper obeyed and put the car in park.

“Turn the car off.” Jasper obeyed again. Antonio’s cell phone rang.

“Yeah, Lorenzo. It’s done? Shit, you guys are quick. There’s a rented car in the parking lot. Jasper, what car were you driving?”

“A gray Lexus.”

“Where did you park it?”

“In the fucking lot.”

“Jasper, do I look like I’m playing games? Don’t fuck with me now.”

“How the fuck do I know? It’s on the right-hand side of the lot. How many fucking gray Lexuses could there be in the parking lot? There’s a raincoat in the front seat.”

“Lorenzo, it’s a gray Lexus with a raincoat in the front seat. It might be on the right-hand side of the building. Grab it and bring it to Highlands. I’m here waiting.”

Jasper now knew where they were located. He was certain Antonio was going to kill him. Jasper realized he had to plan an escape. What immeasurable value did he have to Antonio? None. He witnessed a tremendous crime that could put Antonio in prison for life or get the death penalty. They remained seated in the car.

“Jasper, you saw some things today that you should not have. I’m sorry for that.”

“There’s no need to apologize. Why are we here?”

“Let’s get out of the car so we can talk.”

“Get out of the car? There’s nothing surrounding us?”

“I have a place in the building here.”

They walked into the abandoned building. Jasper hesitated, but his options were limited. He did not have his cell phone. It was in his coat pocket in the rental car. Antonio had a gun, and there was no place to go. After they entered the building, to Jasper’s surprise, he saw the area in the warehouse was modestly furnished. He concluded that Antonio used this location for secretive business.

“Have a seat. Let’s discuss some things.” Jasper walked over to a black leather sofa.

“I suppose you’ve learned a lot about me today, Jasper.”

“I won’t say that I haven’t.”

“Jasper, what you may not understand, what you don’t see, is that there are many circumstances, many issues leading up to what you observed. My father was holding me back. There is so much more that I can do now, for this family, my way. Do you know how difficult it is to breathe when someone else has captured all of your air and they ration the amount you may receive? However, now, there’s plenty of oxygen. Hell, now I can breathe freely. I can fill my lungs.” Antonio hit his chest. “When I can’t breathe, I can’t run, I can’t walk, and I can’t even fucking crawl to where I need to be in life. Fuck. I was dying. It was him or me.” Antonio walked around the room almost in a daze. He was in deep thought about his situation. He was not expressing his thoughts to Jasper, but instead reflecting upon his situation, his unsteady relationship with his father and justifying his actions. Jasper looked for ways to make an escape.

Antonio ceased pacing around the room. He sat on an armchair and directed his comments to Jasper.

“Lorenzo will be here shortly. Jasper, in my business, I’m surrounded by men who have brawn. No intellect. I can’t make the things I need to happen if I’m alone. I need educated people who I can trust. I need you.”

“Antonio, this is not what I do. You are beyond what I can engage.”

“Work for me, Jasper.”

“Antonio, maybe I’m not being clear. I can’t work for you.”

Antonio ignored Jasper. “First, there’s the IPO. We need to make that deal happen.”

“Look, Antonio. I think that your father was right. If there is illegal shit going on here, you don’t want the S.E.C. on your back.”

“MY FATHER? MY FATHER?” Antonio wildly shouted. He pulled out his gun and tapped it on Jasper’s chest as he continued.

“What are you talking about?” Jasper remained silent. “Just fucking listen to what I have to say. NOW YOU ARE GOING TO WORK FOR ME!” Jasper was afraid but was careful not to show it. Realizing his unjustified temper, Antonio returned the gun to his waistband.

“I need new outside money flowing into this company. The potential is huge. I can raise billions in capital. This brings me to the second reason. My father was doing business with Botswanans in South Africa. He broke off talks when things were not going his way. He was weak. I am strong. I want you to help me.”

“How? Talks with Botswanans? South Africa? On WHAT matters?”

“We are interested in importing diamonds. There is a healthy market for what I can offer. We’ve established the pipelines. I need the intellectual business power with me on this. I don’t have it in-house.”

“What could I possibly offer?”

“I need you to establish the appropriate shell company and get the right business structures in place.”

“Antonio, you can do that yourself.”

“You are not hearing what I have been saying.”

“I hear what you are saying, but I am not . . . I cannot do this, Antonio. What the hell don’t you understand?”

“I need your expertise!” Antonio stared in Jasper’s face. “There is a lot to my family’s affairs that is complicated. A third reason is that we export

product from Colombia.”

“What product?”

“Don’t be so fucking naïve, Jasper. I’m sure you fucking figured out we live beyond the means of that Michigan iron and steel company. It’s not THAT profitable.”

Jasper wanted Antonio to be explicit. “What product?”

“What the fuck do you think? Bananas? Drugs, Jasper, cocaine.”

“So what do you want me to be? A mule? Run coke up my ass and smuggle it into this country for you?”

“You see, now you are being a smart-ass. You’re not afraid though. You and I are rare people. We can play both sides of this business game. That’s why I like you, Jasper. You were never afraid. I envied that about you.”

“Look, Antonio, cut to the chase. Don’t try to bullshit around with me.”

“I have associates in my Colombian importing business here in the States who are very wealthy. They need guidance. It is hard for them to explain their \$10 million houses to the government. They need your help.”

“Antonio, like I said earlier, you could do this just the same as I can.”

“WHO DO YOU THINK HAS BEEN DOING THIS ALL ALONG? THERE ARE TOO MANY ASSOCIATES. I CAN NO LONGER DO ALL THIS ALONE. I NEED YOUR EXPERTISE. I NEED YOUR HELP!”

Lorenzo pulled up outside in Jasper’s rental car. He entered the warehouse and stood at the entrance way blocking the door and was silent. Jasper assessed the scenario and recognized the implications of the proposal.

“I need time to think about this, Antonio. You’re asking a great deal from me. I won’t be able to do this alone. I will need to ask my partners . . . certain staff members.”

Antonio looked at Lorenzo standing at the door with his arms folded. Jasper noticed their eye contact and concluded what it meant.

“I need to know now. Are you committed to this, Jasper?”

“What would be in this for me, for others I need to bring on?”

“Millions.”

Jasper knew he couldn't refuse. If he did, either Lorenzo or Antonio would ensure he did not leave that warehouse alive. But he also didn't want to seem artificially enthused.

“Who will protect me . . . from the Feds for example?”

“NOW you're asking what you should be asking. We will. You will be part of my family.”

Jasper pondered for a few moments. There was no choice. “Then we have a deal.”

“Good. Lorenzo, give Jasper his car keys. We don't want him to miss his flight.” Lorenzo tossed the car keys to Jasper. “Have a safe trip home. I will speak with you in a few days.”

Jasper nodded his head and left the building. He was thankful that he was leaving the building alive. He was unsure of his next steps. But while the criminal activity concerned him, Jasper was interested in the financial gains he could achieve from their affiliation.

Over time, Jasper established an illicit business with the Ignacio family and their associates. Antonio referred other clients with unscrupulous books and records to Jasper's company, and Jasper did not refuse. He spent weeks personally meeting with numerous drug-related families that were based in various parts of the United States. It was clear to Jasper, however, that these individuals were gullible, and Jasper found ways to embezzle their money for himself from these dangerous crime families.

One month before Jasper's arrest, Antonio introduced Jasper to a cocaine-smuggling family named Dizilios. They needed to launder hundreds of millions of dollars in several transactions through a fictitious company that was incorporated in Arizona. Jasper set up the companies and the series of money transfers that occurred. Jasper later channeled over \$600 million in total to his personal account. After the money was transferred, Jasper arranged a scheme against the Dizilioses by notifying the federal narcotics division and had members of their ring arrested at the

airport when smuggling the cocaine into the United States. However, these individuals were merely a front operation. Jasper was unaware that the Dizilioses' money and operations was really Ignacio family funds.

Present Day: Day after the Arrest at the Courthouse Jail

"Officer!" shouted Jasper. A new corrections officer approached Jasper's cell.

"What's your problem, man?"

"I have not yet heard from my attorney or my wife. Officer Williams was going to investigate the status, but he has not yet returned."

"Well, I bet he'll return with information, man. Stay calm." The young officer approached Jasper's cell more closely and whispered, "Man, you have some fly gear. Are you a model or something?"

Toast, Anyone?

December 2003, Six Months before the Arrest

Jazz music was playing at the Copley Town Club on East Sixty-eighth Street in Manhattan on a warm winter evening in early December 2003, six months before Jasper's arrest. Ramone Santos was promoting an elite event a few weeks before the New Year for prestigious New York millionaires. Ramone ensured prominent men and women representing various professions and a broad array of interests were invited. Jasper was invited to the affair since he was on *New York* magazine's list of the top 50 multimillionaire entrepreneurs.

Ramone had become a social leader who promoted special interest gatherings all over the country. He chaired the board of the National Organization of 500 Influencers, was vice chair of the American Businessmen for a Change, and sat on the boards of several nonprofit arts and culture organizations in New York and Los Angeles. Ramone accumulated a modest financial base through real estate investments that appreciated during the housing boom. However, his financial means were far less than Jasper's, but Ramone had the luxury of dedicating his time working in areas he enjoyed. Jasper viewed Ramone's work as a rich old lady's pastime.

"Can I get anything for you?" Solae asked Jasper.

"Oh, no, but thank you. My drink is fine."

Jasper recognized Solae, Ramone's girlfriend. She is five feet eleven inches and twenty-nine years old born in St. Lucia, West Indies, her father's native island. Solae is biracial, her skin the color of creamy eggnog. Her legs were long and shapely. She wore a short cropped hairdo that emphasized her strong African facial features. Her eyes were alive and bright. Her mother is French Canadian and met her father through his importing and exporting business. Solae never quite knew what products or services her father sold, but it was lucrative for the family as she attended the finest fashion design schools in Italy and Paris.

Although Jasper thought she had external beauty, Solae would not have been good enough for Jasper. Only a virgin like Laura could be his wife and certainly not a woman who pranced around a runway revealing her body as a fashion model for years and exposed to playboys and wild parties with cocaine, marijuana, and pills. In his mind, Solae certainly was beneath him.

“Ladies, gentlemen, I ask for your attention,” Ramone announced at the center of the ballroom. “Thank you all for coming and supporting this event. We’ve arrived at the climax of our evening. Each year I have the pleasure of arranging to have powerful change agents as yourselves gather to celebrate your accomplishments in society. Tonight I would like to recognize several of these men. The first recipient of the Leadership for a Change Award is . . . Mr. Alan Bernstein.” There was a round of applause. Alan joined Ramone at the center of the room.

Ramone continued, “Alan Bernstein funded over \$1 million each to twelve nonprofit organizations across the country as a result of his national sponsorship drive. These funds will be used to build community recreation centers in inner cities and launch a nationwide travel program for youth to visit countries such as Nigeria, Japan, and China. Please give another round of applause to Mr. Alan Bernstein.”

Ramone paused and looked at Jasper. He knew Jasper was anxiously waiting for his name to be called. “On the political front, the recipient is . . . Mark D. Petersen who was reelected to the U.S. House of Representatives for a second term.” There is a sports arena-like shouting that ensues.

Ramone continued, “Mark, the incumbent democratic in New York’s midtown area, was challenged in a heated political debate for his seat. His outreach to help build a minority entrepreneurship foundation was nonexistent for most of us in this room tonight. His work will help ensure an increase of millionaire businessmen in our communities in the future.” There was another loud round of applause.

“And finally, in the financial arena . . .” Jasper is confident that Ramone will announce him in this category. Jasper put his drink down and buttoned his suit jacket in preparation for approaching the center of the floor. “Charles Derben’s hedge fund private equity firm Derben and Derben,

LLC, announced a \$100 million deal with the minority-owned National Federal Bank, bringing increased liquidity to the capital markets. I give you the recipient . . . Mr. Charles Derben.” There is a round of applause as the three men stood together beside Ramone and graciously accepted their recognition.

Ramone concluded, “Ladies and gentlemen, a champagne toast to the successes of these distinguished men!”

Jasper thought it was absurd that these men received the recognition over him. His firm had phenomenal revenue growth and was the second most successful medium-sized auditing and consulting firm in the country. He locked eyes with Ramone who intentionally smirked at Jasper who understood why his name was not mentioned for yet another year. Ramone and Jasper’s ongoing contention continued—first at the university level, later in the business arena, and now in social venues.

Ramone and fellow colleagues believed that Cunningham, Gates & Waddell were ill-reputed. There were rumors that the company gained hefty contracts under questionable circumstances and that their business practices were deemed unethical. Ramone used this as his right to ostracize Jasper whenever possible. As Ramone walked across the room, he intentionally ignored Jasper and began speaking to someone standing adjacent to Jasper. Ramone’s disregard further insulted Jasper, so he confronted him.

“Hello, Ramone.” Jasper extended his hand.

Ramone reluctantly shook Jasper’s hand and said, “Cunningham, I’m glad you were able to attend.”

“I’m sure you are,” replied Jasper.

“It IS good to see you.”

“I’m sure it IS,” Jasper again replied.

Falsely attempting to make small talk, Ramone asked, “How is the financial industry treating you?”

“It’s going well. But then again, one would never know given I wasn’t mentioned in your salutation tonight . . . or in prior years for that matter.”

“There are just too many accomplishments achieved by men and women alike who are in this room tonight. I only wish we could recognize them all,” Ramone jabbed.

“I’m not convinced that most in this room have grossed nearly half a billion dollars in revenues last year. But then again, to your point, there are many accomplishments in this room.”

Ramone hammered at Jasper. “Cunningham, these people who I named are respectable citizens earning their position within New York, hell nationally, in a legal manner. They do not succumb to extortion, fraud, and corruption to make their mark in this world. Are any of those verbs familiar to you?”

“You pompous prick.”

“Don’t play naïve, Cunningham. Your company drove the Silverton IPO. Investors and investment bankers alike are mopping up their losses from that farce of a transaction. An audit opinion from your firm was a golden spoon to obtain public investor confidence.”

Jasper chuckled.

“How much did you gain?” asked Ramone.

Jasper chuckled again with an arrogant tone.

“Laugh when the SEC and the feds are handcuffing you alongside the Ignacios, you faux businessman.”

Jasper immediately became extremely serious. “Spread rhetoric like that and Antonio Ignacio will handcuff your lips permanently.”

With a hint of fear, Ramone folded his arms across his chest and questioned, “Are you threatening me? You’ve become a mobster too now?”

Jasper raised his champagne glass to Ramone and sarcastically said, “Cheers to you, Ms. Charity.”

Ramone watched Jasper walk away and turned away insulted. Jasper walked a third the way across the room and crossed paths with Solae.

“I think I will take you up on your offer for a drink now,” said Jasper.

“Most certainly.” She called over a waiter, “Carlos, please get another glass of champagne for the gentleman.”

“Actually, Carlos, I will have vodka on the rocks with lime,” said Jasper.

The volume of the music rose. It was Betty Carter’s “Mr. Gentleman” playing.

“I apologize I have not had the pleasure of formally meeting you.”

“I’m Jasper Cunningham of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell.”

“Oh, yes, indeed. My apologies. It’s good to meet you. I’m Solae Ngane.”

“And certainly a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ngane.” Jasper kissed her hand. Solae was flattered.

“Mr. Cunningham, I dare mention that I am seeking interested investors for my winter fashion show, and I think I might gain your interest. I have run the financial projections, and my investment bankers are pitching a 30 percent return on investment plus the business goodwill attained and potential client relationships. The attendees will be wealthy fashion goers from across the globe.”

“You are quite forthright and optimistic, Ms. Ngane. Your fiancé must be beyond himself to have such an entrepreneurial spirit in his midst. It must be difficult for him to say no to you.”

“Mr. Cunningham, my fiancé does not have me in his midst nor I am compelled to seek approval from Ramone.”

Jasper began to take interest in the spiritedness of his newly found friendship.

“Call me Jasper.”

Solae smiled and responded, “I’d prefer Mr. Cunningham.”

At that time, Charlie Parker’s “My Favorite Things” began to play.

“Do you like jazz, Ms. Solae Ngane?”

“That I do, Mr. Cunningham.”

“Please, sit and listen to these wonderful sounds with me. Delicately beautiful music to be enjoyed by a lovely, elegant woman such as yourself.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cunningham. But I apologize. I am largely here in a business capacity. However, it was nice to meet you, and I certainly look forward to discussing my investment proposition with you in detail.”

Solae extended her hand to Jasper. He felt slightly defeated and gently shook her hand. How dare she refuse him? he thought. Who does this ex-model think she is? Jasper looked at Solae’s body and thought of the pleasures he could have with her and the insult it would be to Ramone, particularly after being publicly snubbed by Ramone tonight.

“Please . . . call my office for an appointment . . . to discuss further.” Jasper handed his business card to Solae.

“I will call you in the upcoming days. It was truly a pleasure.”

Jasper looked at her with piercing eyes and asked, “Can I get your promise, Ms. Ngane?”

Solae read his intent clearly.

“I don’t make promises, Mr. Cunningham.” She teasingly walked away.

A week and a half later, Jasper had finished a teleconference call at his office when his assistant buzzed.

“Sir, there is a Solae Ngane here to see you.”

“Was she on my calendar?”

“No, Mr. Cunningham.” Jasper paused and remembered Ramone’s girlfriend’s smugness and Ramone’s deliberate disregard of him at the function earlier in the month. He rubbed his chin and smiled.

“Jeanette, send her in please.”

Solae was dressed in a buff yellow cashmere coat. Her coat was wide open as she walked in revealing a low-cleavage winter white fitted dress underneath and matching knee-high patent leather stiletto boots. Her fashion sense was apparent, and Jasper found the flair in her strides sensual.

“Mr. Cunningham, I am so glad you were able to see me today.”

“Ms. Ngane, it is lovely to see you as well. What a pleasant surprise.”

“I wanted to set up an appointment in advance, however, I was unexpectedly in Europe the past ten days. I returned yesterday. I realize the holidays are upon us and didn’t want too much time to pass before we had a follow-up conversation.”

“Please have a seat, and I will check to ensure my 11:00 am meeting is pushed back.”

“Thank you.”

Jasper pressed his intercom. “Jeanette, please let Drew McIntosh know that I would like to make our 11:00 am meeting a noon lunch instead and book Savaratti restaurant.”

“Most certainly, sir,” replied Jeanette.

Solae had been a high-fashion runway model. At seventeen years old, Solae signed with Tryst and traveled across Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and Austria and met many people from varied walks of life. Her beauty was even more appealing than Jasper had recalled.

Solae had taken off her coat and was seated at the conference table. Jasper walked over to Solae and sat next to her. Solae opened her burgundy leather portfolio with the investment paperwork to begin her road show. Jasper put his hand across hers and closed the portfolio.

“No games, Ms. Ngane. I am prepared to write a check for \$100,000. Is that what you expected?”

Solae was astonished since she had not discussed any details of the event with Jasper. But she wasn’t naïve. Jasper was a businessman. And she heard that he was unethical and played to win. She knew what he wanted from his eyes. As a model, she was not unfamiliar with the price of success. In spite of her love for Ramone, rich and powerful men greatly intrigued Solae; therefore, she was willing to concede. She looked at Jasper with agreeing eyes. But Jasper did not want to make love to Solae. Instead, he wanted to degrade Ramone’s woman. To snub her just as how Ramone had

rebuffed him a few weeks prior at the awards event and on other occasions. This desire was not unlike Jasper. He always sought revenge either directly or indirectly.

Jasper got up, locked his office door, and turned toward Solae. She eagerly stood up and met Jasper halfway. The intensity of Solae's eyes caused Jasper's passion to grow stronger. Jasper pulled her slim body close to his and kissed her hard on the lips with a raw aggression as he held the back of her neck and a handful of her hair. Jasper sucked on her tongue and nibbled her lips. He pressed his body against hers, and both of their lustful desires heightened.

Jasper pushed Solae down to her knees. Jasper dropped his pants and held himself against Solae's lips. She momentarily thought about Ramone and concluded she wasn't psychologically willing to partake in sex. Her mind was telling her to stop, but she simply obeyed. Solae closed her eyes and semi-reluctantly kissed him.

"Come on, Ms. Ngane"—pushing himself in her mouth more—"you can please me better than that."

Solae took a deep breath and slowly licked him and thereafter placed him in her mouth. He held the back of her head to direct the pace and force as he moaned in elation. He looked down on her as she sucked him for over fifteen minutes, enjoying her subservient position. Jasper wanted her body at this point, so he lifted Solae off her knees and pulled her dress down from her shoulder, revealing her perfect 40C bust. He yanked her breasts out of her black lace bra and sucked on her insatiably with total disregard for Solae's response. He turned Solae around and raised her dress, revealing a black silk thong.

"You look so fucking good. Ramone can't handle this. You are far too much woman for him." Solae remained silent.

Jasper squeezed her tight round buttocks gently then with more conviction. For a moment, he wanted to take off his belt and spank her. But he refrained only because he thought his assistant might hear Solae's screams. Instead, Jasper raised his right hand and spanked her hard, lost in the infliction of pain. Solae was a fair-skinned woman, and her buttocks

became pink then red. Jasper enjoyed the aggression and continued to spank Solae another ten or so lashes with his right hand while she bent over his desk, and he squeezed her left breast. He pulled off one leg of her thong, spat on his right hand fingers, and rubbed between Solae's buttocks to prepare her for what he craved. He massaged her quickly then forcefully entered her buttocks.

"Ah," Solae shrieked. "Easy, Jasper."

"Easy?" Jasper thrust harder into Solae as though he was riding a steer. "Don't tell me easy. I can tell you've taken men this way before." He slapped her ass with conviction. "Is this how Ramone fucks you?"

"Oh, Jasper, not so rough." But Jasper pushed harder into Solae.

"I wanted to fuck your ass ten days ago. Bitch, you thought you were so high society, didn't you? Ramone's whore . . . You're my whore . . . right now." Jasper paused, slowed his pace only to gain leverage to thrust harder into Solae. He hung on to her breast from below and incessantly slapped her buttocks harder than before and thrust his body into Solae. Solae shrieked in pain. And Jasper continued, "You come into my office unannounced with your Chanel perfume and perky nipples showing through your flesh-tight dress knowing this is what you want." He pushed more forcefully and squeezed her breasts more sternly. "Were you thinking about me today, whore?"

"Jasper . . . no more." Solae clenched her teeth. She attempted to grab anything in her reach for security but instead knocked down the documents that were on his conference table.

"Bitch, don't call my name in your whore mouth."

The intercom in Jasper's office sounded. He ignored it briefly, but it continued. He was in arm's reach, so he paused and hit the button.

"Yes, Jeanette," he answered, breathing heavily and annoyed that he had to cease what he was doing.

"The reservations are confirmed."

"Thanks, Jeanette."

Solae eased forward, and Jasper was no longer inside of her body. Jasper returned to the attention of Solae. He smiled cunningly.

“OK. You’ve had enough. But I haven’t. Kneel down again.” Slowly Solae bent her left leg then her right and kneeled in front of Jasper.

“Make me happy, Solae.”

Solae massaged, pulled, and rubbed Jasper. She wanted this whole episode to be over. He grabbed her hands for extra pressure. After a short while, Jasper intentionally ejaculated all over her face. Jasper caught his breath and turned away from her.

Solae stood up. She had experienced similar “pseudo assaults” in the fashion circuit when she auditioned to get modeling assignments. It had been a long time, and she was older now and extremely distraught. She wasn’t quite sure why she had not stopped him, why she had not run out of his office. Was it because she was enamored by his stature, his wealth, and his power? Perhaps she subconsciously wanted to be Jasper’s lover and enjoy the five-star restaurants, extravagant gifts, and trips abroad. But by the look on Jasper’s face, she realized that would not be the case. Not once had he uttered a kind word to her. He never kissed her mouth and only wanted her anally. Worst of all, he degraded her in the face. Solae clenched her teeth and reached into her large red clutch purse for a Kleenex to wipe her face.

“Feel free to use my bathroom,” he said in a businesslike tone as he closed his pants and walked away.

Solae slowly rose and went to the marbleized bathroom suite within Jasper’s office. Based on Jasper’s callous demeanor, Solae was even more committed to carrying out her charge. The FBI agents had approached Solae after the award party earlier in the month searching for someone who would be willing to participate in an attempt to gather evidence against Jasper and his firm. At the time, Solae did not have any personal incentive to assist in bolstering federal charges against Jasper. Ramone was disgusted with the pervasive corporate corruption committed by Jasper and his partners and saw Solae’s investment proposition as an opportunity to get close to Jasper

and help bring Jasper and his firm down. Ramone could not have fathomed what Jasper would do to his girlfriend.

While in the bathroom, Solae took out the recorder transmitter FBI Agent Lawson provided to her earlier in the week. Lawson asked her to plant the bug in Jasper's office. As the FBI recommended, she taped the bug underneath the sink basin. She proceeded to clean herself, flushed the toilet, and walked out of the bathroom. Jasper was standing by his desk.

Jasper said, "You know you are a good fuck." Solae felt ashamed and walked past Jasper. He held her arm.

"Not so fast, Ms. Ngane. I keep my word. Here is my investment for \$100,000, Ms. Ngane. I look forward to reaping the 30 percent return you promised. Perhaps I can conduct additional business with you," he smirked.

Solae extended her hand to reach for the check, but before she could take it, Jasper dropped it, so it floated to the floor. Solae hesitated but kept her chin up while bending down and extending her hand to the floor to pick up the check. When she touched the check, Jasper lifted his wing-tipped shoe and stepped on the check. She looked up at him from her bent position, and he looked down. They stared at each other for what felt like forever to Solae.

Jasper broke the silence. "You work really well in that position, Miss Ngane."

Jasper clearly had insulted and degraded Solae. Jasper grinned at her and concluded he had beaten Ramone. He walked back to his desk.

As Solae walked out his office with her check, he smirked under his breath, "Kiss my ass, Ramone." But Solae heard his comment and shed a tear as she gathered her belongings and left his office.

The following morning, Solae and Ramone were having breakfast at a French eatery on Eighth Avenue one block from Ramone's apartment. They ate crepes and drank café lattes.

"You came home very late last night," said Ramone.

“I had to stop at Marjorie Hinton’s home to view her new line of scarves. We’re thinking about sponsoring a show solely with a scarf theme for the spring.”

“Sounds unique.” Ramone looked at Solae’s eyes. She avoided direct eye contact. “Were you able to visit Cunningham’s office yesterday?”

Solae took a deep breath. “Yes, I did.”

Ramone was surprised that she had not volunteered to discuss the meeting on her own and that she did not elaborate on what had transpired.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Everything went according to plan. I pitched our upcoming fashion show at Martha’s Vineyard, and he was intrigued with the business plan. He was more fashion aware than I thought he would be. He even said how appealing it was to have a show at the Vineyard at this time of year. He gave me a check for \$100,000.”

“What? Congratulations! This is fabulous news.”

Solae debated whether or not to tell Ramone about the assault that transpired in Jasper’s office. But she knew Ramone and Jasper had deep-rooted animosity for each other. It was a no-win situation, she thought. Either Ramone might physically try to harm Jasper or possibly misconstrue that Solae came on to Jasper, and Ramone would leave her. Solae felt Ramone would not want to touch her anymore after the despicable manner in which Jasper treated her. She needed Ramone and didn’t want to lose him. Ramone helped to develop Solae’s confidence and career.

“Great, but what about the transmitter? Were you able to plant it?”

“Yeah.”

“Yeah? Just yeah? Do you know how meaningful . . . how groundbreaking this is? Did you contact FBI Agent Lawson?”

“I called him yesterday at lunchtime.”

“You did? And why didn’t you call me?”

Solae ranted, “Honey, I really got so buried with the plans for the upcoming show and now this new one. It was hard day. Come on, I have a lot going on. This detective work is all new to me. I am stressed.”

They finished their crepes and left the coffee shop, and Ramone persuaded Solae to take a walk through Central Park. Given Solae’s apparent state of frustration, he was even more pleased at what he was about to present to her. Ramone reached into the chest pocket of his coat and pulled out a black velvet ring box and kneeled in front of Solae. Solae’s eyes became vibrant. She placed her hands over her mouth as Ramone opened the box to reveal a two-carat princess-cut diamond ring in a platinum setting.

“Oh my god . . . oh my god!”

“Solae, you are the most beautiful woman I have ever known. You are my heart, you are my inner being. I love you, and I need for you to be my wife so that life can be everything I always wanted. I will make you the happiest woman on earth until the day I die. I will protect you and care for you until the day I die. Solae Ngane, will you marry me?”

“Ramone, I love you too.” Solae cried with joy. But her tears were also blended with the pain she had experienced the day before in Jasper’s office. “Yes, I will marry you.” Ramone stood up, hugged, and kissed his fiancée.

As they continued their stroll, Solae enjoyed the new diamond sparkle on her hand. She really wanted to confide in Ramone, but the rivalry between the two men was too passionate. Disclosing the events of the previous day could jeopardize a lifetime of love, happiness, and emotional and moral support that she needed. Solae looked at her ring and her future husband and decided the incident would die as a secret between her and Jasper.

Baby Cunningham

Present Day: Day after the Arrest at the Courthouse Jail

Two hours later, Officer Williams entered the holding pen area and approached Jasper's cell.

"Mr. Cunningham, I investigated the matters that you requested, and I have some news."

"Good, man!"

"Your attorney has been contacted."

"Good job. What else did you find out?"

"Your wife is in St. Mary's Hospital."

"Hospital?" It occurred to Jasper that Laura had not bailed him out because she must have gone into labor. "Is it Laura? Did she give birth to my son?"

"Sorry, that's all I know."

Jasper was unaware of the events that occurred after Laura left his office the morning of his arrest.

The Morning of Jasper's Arrest

After overhearing Jasper and Tracey plot to murder her, Laura entered the elevator intent to leave her husband's office building, return home, pack her things, and take a flight to Washington, D.C., to be with her family. She called her parents while she rode down the elevator, and her father answered the line.

"Daddy, I'm coming home," she cried. "He was going to murder me. Oh my god, Daddy, Jasper was going to murder me! He and his mistress were going to kill me!"

"Laura, where are you? What is going on? Where is Jasper? Are you all right?" asked the retired judge.

“I will be fine. I just need to come home now. I’ll take the 7:00 pm LaGuardia Airport shuttle tonight. I love you. Tell Mother I will see her soon.”

Laura arrived at the lobby level of Jasper’s office building when severe abdominal pain ensued. The stress from what she recently heard Jasper and Tracey discussing was extreme. *Jasper and Tracey plotting to kill me?* She knew Jasper had not loved her like she deserved, but Laura had not fathomed he would plan to murder her. *With his mistress? This could not be real!*

Laura walked closer to the entrance of the high-rise office tower in a trance, but the pain became intense. Before exiting the building, she managed to walk over to a restroom on the lobby level. She entered the restroom and hunched over the bathroom sink in pain.

“Miss, are you all right?” Laura’s condition drew great concern from a woman coming out of a stall.

“Yes, I’m fine. I’m just experiencing Braxton Hicks labor pains,” she said. “I’m not due for weeks.”

“I’ve given birth to four children, and that doesn’t look like false labor pains to me. Would you like for me to call the ambulance?”

“No . . . no, I will be fine,” replied Laura.

The pain temporarily subsided, and Laura decided to attempt to go home again. She arrived outside of the building in a daze and thought what a pretty day it was as the sun rays beamed across her face. Disoriented, Laura attempted to hail a taxi to return to Westchester even though Jasper’s private limousine was waiting for her in the parking garage under the building. As she stepped off the curb and waved her right arm, she was struck by a minivan instantaneously.

The ambulance arrived within moments treating her on the scene. As they screeched off to the hospital, Laura was unconscious, in labor, and losing blood profusely.

Tracey was returning to Jasper’s office building because she had left her handbag in Jasper’s office when she scurried out after Laura surprisingly

appeared. Tracey watched the ambulance speed away, and she approached a bystander.

“What happened?” Tracey asked the building security guard.

“A pregnant woman was hit by a van and taken to the hospital.”

Tracey paused for a moment.

“Pregnant woman? Did you know her?”

“Lady, I don’t know. I’m just covering for someone who is out today. The EMT said they were going to St. Mary’s Hospital. You know that woman?”

“I . . . don’t . . . know.”

Frantically, Tracey approached another woman who was standing nearby discussing the accident with someone. It was the same woman who saw Laura in pain in the restroom a few moments prior to the accident.

“Did you see what happened?” asked Tracey.

“Well, there was a very pregnant woman who was buckled over in pain in the lobby. She looked like she was about to faint. I knew there was something wrong with her. Anyway, the next thing I knew, she stepped outside, and the van parked over there ran her down. I can’t believe this.”

“Who was she?” asked Tracey.

“I have no idea.”

Tracey called Jasper’s office, but no one answered, including his assistant. Tracey thought that was extremely odd. Tracey was unaware that the FBI was upstairs terrorizing the firm and arresting Jasper and his partners. Tracey returned to her office. She attempted to call Jasper several repeated times, but no response. She was convinced that Laura had been in the accident, and Jasper was with her.

Tracey dialed Information.

“Can I get the phone number for St. Mary’s Hospital please?” Tracey dialed the hospital.

“Yes, I’m trying to find out whether someone was brought in about an hour ago.”

“Can I get a name?”

“Laura Cunningham. She would have arrived in the emergency room. She is eight months pregnant and was hit by a car.”

“Hold on please.” Tracey waited on the phone for about ten minutes and was about to hang up when the operator returned.

“Ma’am, a woman was brought in fitting that description. However, we cannot confirm her name.”

“Please find out for me,” Tracey said in desperation. “Is anyone with her? Is there a man with her?”

“Ma’am, I can’t investigate any further. You will need to come down here. Good luck.” And the operator hung up the phone.

Tracey stared at the receiver. It must be Laura. She tried calling Jasper’s cell phone. No reply. Was the plan still on? Did Jasper change his mind? Would she lose Jasper and the possibility of having a baby in her life? Tracey wanted to learn whether the plan was still intact. Relying on her instincts, she headed to St. Mary’s Hospital.

When the EMT pulled up to St. Mary’s Hospital, Laura was hemorrhaging profusely. The obstetrical staff awaited her arrival in the emergency area.

“What are her vitals?” asked Dr. Ramish as the triage team wheeled Laura inside.

“Her pulse is seventy-five, blood pressure is 85/65. She is having contractions every ninety seconds, however, the baby’s heartbeat is dropping, and the delivery is not progressing. She is only three centimeters dilated,” answered the emergency medical technician.

“People, let’s prep for a C-section. Get her into room 2. Stat!” shouted Dr. Ramish.

Laura was in and out of consciousness and unable to speak. As she lay on the operating table fighting for her life and the life of her unborn child,

Laura's mind drifted on early memories of happy times with Jasper on her honeymoon.

The Year 2000

They arrived in Maui, Hawaii, on a clear sunny morning. They had flown nearly sixteen hours and were pretty exhausted. The limousine greeted them at the airport and chauffeured them to their hotel on the other side of the island. Their hotel cottage was ground level on an oceanfront. They walked into their tropical décor room with bamboo and palm tree bark furniture. The walls were tangerine and the bedding lime green.

"We had the most beautiful wedding, Jasper."

Jasper held his new wife. "Yes, we did. You were the most beautiful bride. You were absolutely stunning."

"Did you see how Janice sprinted for the bouquet? She ran faster than Flo Jo." They both laughed.

"Better still, Andrew was so desperate to get close to Janice that he sprung into the air like Michael Jordan to catch the garter." They laughed again and hugged each other.

"I only wished my mother was alive to see such a wonderful day," Jasper said.

Laura gently touched Jasper's shoulder. "Believe me, she did." They kissed.

Laura started unpacking while Jasper watched the ocean waves from their open room door. It had been over two years since Jasper took a vacation, and he had never been away from his business for more than a few days. Jasper took pleasure in the sound of the ocean waves crashing onto the shore. The beach was empty. The cottages were nestled in between large leafy palm trees and coconut trees for extreme privacy. Jasper turned and gazed at his lovely wife. With a renewed energy, he said, "Let's get changed and go waterskiing this morning."

"I like your style, Cunningham." Laura pulled out a notepad and pen and sat at the desk. "But first let's plan out all of our activities for the entire

two weeks we are here so we don't—"

"Wait, stop," Jasper interrupted. "No planning. Just spontaneous enjoyment."

"What?"

"Don't worry, we won't miss a thing." Jasper kissed Laura on the lips.

They showered and dressed with their swimsuits and waterskiing outfits and walked toward the jetty. They spent an hour waterskiing and thereafter returned to shore to have lunch. They found an ocean side seafood restaurant. On their return stroll to their cottage, they playfully chased each other between the palm and coconut trees on the sand.

"OUCH!" she yelled and held her toe, stumbling down onto the sand. Jasper increased his speed and quickly approached her.

"What happened?"

"I stubbed my toe on that stupid conch shell over there."

"Let me see." Jasper sat next to Laura in the sand between the trees. He held her big toe and massaged it gently.

"How does that feel?"

"Ah . . . a little better. Keep rubbing."

Jasper continued massaging and started over her entire foot.

"Feels better?"

"Mmm . . . mmm."

He kissed her toes and licked them softly. She enjoyed the arousing relief from the pain.

"Lie down on your back," Jasper whispered in her ear. Laura stretched out onto the sand. Jasper took a handful of sand and rubbed his hands together just enough to allow a grainy residue to remain. Jasper placed his hands gingerly over Laura's body, tickling her and stimulating her senses in an unusual way.

“Mmmmm. What are you doing to me? Oooh . . . that tickles,” she chuckled.

Jasper grabbed Laura’s bikini pants bottoms on either side and eased them off her body. He licked her exposed body in a start and stop motion.

“Oh, yes . . . what are you doing with that tongue of yours?” Jasper continued to lick between her legs. He sucked her, and she became extremely aroused. Jasper lifted her top to expose her breasts that he sucked with pleasure. He massaged her breasts with his slightly sandy hands, stimulating her nipples to a firm erection. He held himself with both hands and rubbed her breasts. As he gently pulsed between her breasts, he cupped her breasts together to snugly embrace him and began a pleasurable pulsating friction.

“Oh, my Jasper . . . yes.” Jasper continued.

Laura then screamed at the top of her lungs, “AAAHHHHH!”

Jasper jumped up. “What happened now?”

“A crab just clawed my thigh. I think I’m bleeding.”

“You are a walking disaster,” Jasper joked. They ceased their lovemaking and headed back to the cottage with Laura limping from the stab and bleeding from the crab bite. They were so exhausted by now that they fell asleep.

They awoke about 8:30 pm that evening, showered, dressed, and walked over to a beach luau well under way. There was Hawaiian music playing in one area and disco music playing in the vicinity near the pool. They drank martinis and ate pua’a kalua, the traditional Hawaiian pig roasted underground. From a distance, Jasper saw a familiar face.

“Laura, I see someone I know over at the lounge.”

“Who is it?”

“You wouldn’t know him. He’s a college fraternity brother. We attended Columbia together. Come over with me to say hello.”

Jasper and Laura walked over to the couple sitting on lounge chairs and sipping cocktails.

“Rob? Rob Peterson?” asked Jasper.

“Cunningham?” Rob jumped off his lounge chair, and they grabbed each other and hugged. “What brings you to Maui?”

“Well, this is my wife of four days. Laura, this is Rob Peterson.”

“Nice to meet you, Laura. What horrid deed did you commit to get sentenced to this guy?”

“Oh, really? Is there something I should be aware of?”

“One word, and it rhymes with *ducked*!” he laughed. “Just kidding.”

“No you’re not,” Laura said.

“OK. I’m not.” They laughed louder. “Congratulations, you two. This is my wife, Kathy.”

“Nice to meet you, Kathy,” said Laura.

“Any special occasion for you two?” asked Jasper.

“We’ve been coming to Maui every year for the past nine years. We celebrate our wedding anniversary here.”

“Nine years? You didn’t spend too much time living as a bachelor, did you?”

“No, I didn’t. I didn’t need to. We have three kids, Robert Jr. who is twelve . . . OK . . . you do the math.” They all laughed. “And Mary Ellen who is eight and Danielle who is three.”

“Oh, man. You are way ahead of us!” They all laughed louder.

“That’s why we come to Maui every year for our anniversary. We relive our honeymoon and find ourselves again. Although our families would love for us to travel to Ireland to see the old country, I’d rather enjoy the Hawaiians.”

“Nice.”

Laura and Kathy started strolling away while Robert and Jasper reminisced.

“What are you up to these days?” asked Robert.

“I established an auditing and consulting firm based in New York. Cunningham, Waddell & Gates. We specialize in private equity valuations, audits of hedge funds, and advisory on merger and acquisition deals.”

“Hey, I’m impressed, Jasper. Is the business profitable?”

“The market is at an all-time high, and revenues couldn’t be stronger! I opened an office on the West Coast last year.”

“Did you really? Whereabouts?”

“In Los Angeles. What’s going on with you lately?”

“I started my own winery in a small town just south of the Napa Valley area.”

“I can see you in the wine business. Which wines are your specialties?”

“We produce a fine chardonnay. In a few years, we are aiming for merlot.”

“Pacing yourself I gather.”

“It’s a very competitive market with generations of entrenched families. We need to develop a premium product that is marketed to buyers who desire new wines. Those who buy my wine tend to be young professionals who rather not drink their ‘father’s’ vintage. So there is great potential. I’m growing on three hundred acres of vineyards, and we ship to four states in the Midwest.”

“Rob, this sounds like possibilities are vast.” Jasper could sense where Rob was going.

“They are . . . and I am looking for investors as we grow. Perhaps we can discuss further when we return.”

“Sounds good.” Jasper wanted to change the conversation. “Waiter, I’ll have a bottle of sparkling water. Anything for you, Rob?”

“I’m good for now.”

The ladies were sitting at the pool bar sipping margaritas.

“The beautiful trees, mountains, warm air . . . this is truly paradise,” said Kathy.

“Yes, indeed it is. I enjoy traveling, and there are few places as naturally picturesque as Maui. What part of California do you live?”

“We live in Napa Valley.”

“I visited there often. I grew up in Palo Alto.”

“What did your parents do?”

“My father was an attorney, and then he became a federal judge in California. And your family?”

“Well, let’s just sum it up to say rednecks from Kansas.” They both laughed. “Rob and I met when he was visiting a client in Kansas where I worked as an administrator.”

“He’s a good catch, I hope.”

“Well, even if I hated him, I would be crazy to leave him and raise three kids alone or with another man that wasn’t their father. So he’ll do.”

Laura detected sadness and regret in Kathy’s statement. Laura hoped she would never feel any degree of disdain for Jasper. The two women were silent for a while.

“By the way, on Saturday, there is an exclusive retreat in the volcanic mountains for couples only. Rob and I look forward to the evening out every time we come to Maui. Perhaps you and Jasper would be interested in going?”

“Tell me more.”

“Well, it’s held in a native village. The guest list is quite elite. The Hawaiians host a ceremony for a select group of people. There’s a tremendous feast of meats, vegetables, and seafood. It’s romantic. There is an opportunity to be free and exploratory with your mate. You get to meet and mingle with a private group. It should be fun for newlyweds such as yourselves.”

“It sounds exclusive.”

“It is. Perhaps Rob can get an invite for you two.”

“I’ll speak with Jasper to see whether he’s interested.”

Over the next couple of days, Rob ran into Jasper and emphasized how exuberant an evening the retreat would be. By Thursday of that week, Jasper and Laura purchased the fifteen-hundred-dollar-per-couple tickets to attend.

On Saturday evening, a limousine arrived at their hotel at 6:00 pm. Three couples including Laura and Jasper were in the car. The third couple was from Phoenix. Rob opened a bottle of wine from the bar in the limousine.

“The ride is about forty-five minutes, and this is good Pinot Grigio, so let’s enjoy.”

The couples drank wine and shared wedding stories finding commonality in their relationships. The car traveled through several mountains and alongside two rivers. The sun was setting, and the natural beauty of the island was radiant. Given the lively discussion, the car ride seemed like a blink to the couples.

They approached a castle that had a tropical architecture. It was sprawling made from bamboo and dried leaves. Jasper and Laura had never seen anything like it before. The limousine stopped, and a native Hawaiian gentleman immediately opened the car door.

“Aloha. Greetings. We welcome you to Pleasure Castle where your romantic inhibitions are freed.” Jasper and Laura looked at each other slightly puzzled by the greeting but politely smiled. “Please join me for dinner at the water’s edge.”

The guests walked over to an area with fire torches in the sand. There were private tables set for two for intimacy. About twenty couples enjoyed a gourmet five-course meal while listening to the ocean waves crash against the shore. They started with chilled lobster soup followed by romaine and local leaf green salad topped with fresh raw oysters and a peppercorn dressing. For their entrée, Laura enjoyed grilled mahi-mahi in a citrus glaze, while Jasper feasted on fire-grilled lobster tails, scallops, and prawns in a

pineapple sauce. For dessert, they shared a warm soft flaky crust pineapple tart with coconut mango ice cream and a drizzle of chocolate sauce.

“This dinner is absolutely out of this world. Look at the beautiful full moon. They gazed at the ocean which was brightly moonlit.”

“You are so beautiful, my wife.”

“I love you.”

“I love you more,” Jasper responded.

“No, I love you most.”

“OK, OK, you love me more,” Jasper joked.

“What?” And Laura put a spoon of mango ice cream on his nose. She then licked it off.

After dinner, the couples were escorted to a huge cottage that housed a designer clothing boutique.

“Please go inside and select your wardrobe for the evening,” the host requested.

“Wardrobe? I thought we were already dressed,” Laura whispered to Jasper.

The couples left the dining area to shop for their new attire. The boutique had a broad array of outfits to choose from for the evening.

Laura and Jasper walked through the boutique. The clothes were fine upscale designer wear, but all were sexually erotic outfits. For the women, there were negligees, black lace teddies, fishnet outfits, and bikinis with crotchless bottoms and cutout nipples. There were all-in-one mesh bodysuits. The male selection included leather underwear with an extended cup and bowties and suspenders in a broad array of colors.

Laura whispered to Jasper, “You have got to be kidding me! What did your frat brother get us into?” she asked sheepishly.

“Let’s just go with it. It may be something we enjoy. We’re together, so we’ll be fine,” Jasper said, although he too had reservations.

Kathy winked at Laura from across the room.

“Well, look who is over there. I’m going to go over to her and tell her where does she get the—”

“Now hold on, Laura,” said Jasper. “This could actually be fun. We’re here together. We simply won’t participate in anything that makes us uncomfortable.”

“Yeah, I suppose you’re right. But I just need to let her know how presumptuous it was of them—”

“Easy, tiger,” chuckled Jasper.

Laura left Jasper and walked over to Kathy who was holding a supermini red leather dress with cutout breasts and cutout buttocks.

“Kathy, I think you and Rob left out some critical details about tonight’s retreat . . . excursion . . . celebration . . . or however you may want to refer to this.”

“Laura, you’re just feeling a bit inhibited at the moment. Trust me on this. I see it in your eyes. I see it in Jasper’s eyes as well. You will enjoy this evening.”

“We’re on our honeymoon, for God’s sake. We’re not like you and Rob who have been married for years. Jasper and I are still getting to know and enjoy each other.”

“Not only will you become closer after tonight, but you will reach pleasures that you never knew even existed. Relax.” Kathy put her dress in front of her body. “How does this look for me?”

Laura looked at the dress, shook her head, and smiled.

“Unbelievable . . . Well, I guess . . . I like it,” she admitted. “It will be very sexy on you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. My breasts are so small. The cutouts just wouldn’t do it for me. It will probably work better on you.”

“Oh, wait . . . you’ve got to be kidding me. I could never—” Laura stood back and shook her head.

“Yes, you can. Let’s head to the fitting room and try these outfits on.” Kathy reached for six other outfits she previously placed on a chair, and they walked to the fitting room.

The women undressed and tried on the sensual clothing. Kathy’s third selection was a taupe-colored all-in-one fishnet bodysuit. You could see her body clear through, but it had enough mesh to give a degree of mystery. Laura looked at Kathy in a playful way, and Kathy smiled at Laura. Laura had remained dressed in Kathy’s first recommendation—the supermini blood red leather dress with the cutout breasts and buttocks. It also had a deep V-neck plunge to the navel. The dress fit Laura like a glove.

“How do I look?” asked Kathy.

“Very nice.”

“Thanks.”

“Let’s go have some real fun.” Kathy kissed Laura on the cheek, and they both left the fitting room. A native Hawaiian woman took the clothes they originally wore and marked their last names on a tag.

The two women separated in search of their husbands. Laura saw Jasper waiting outside of the boutique in a lounge area. When Jasper saw Laura’s outfit, he became on edge. He could not believe what his new bride was wearing. But everyone was dressed the same, and he understood this was the purpose of the night. Jasper was dressed in skin-colored brown fitted knickers, pants that were low cut, stopped at the knee, and no shirt. The buttocks were cutout, and the front portion had a see-through mesh elongated pouch. The mesh cover could easily be removed, if desired. They stared at each other for a moment. Laura shook her head, and they both laughed. She had to admit, this evening clearly was bringing out a side of her buried deeply within.

“Here we go,” Laura said.

The guests were escorted to the bar area in their new attire. Champagne cocktails were being served by waitresses who were clothed in scanty fig leaves.

Nearly half an hour had passed when a very handsome Hawaiian gentleman stood at the center of the room slightly perched up for everyone to see.

“Aloha oukou. Greetings to the adventurous couples who are here tonight. Husbands, wives, friends, lovers, partners . . . each are no longer strangers. We were all brought to this place in the same natural way. We all need air, food, and water in the same natural way. We need the human flesh and emotions in the same natural way. And one day, we will all leave this earth as it is nature’s way. So tonight, right here, right now, WE MUST LIVE AND LOVE JUST AS HOW NATURE ALLOWS US TO! No inhibitions . . . no reservations. Follow your freest of free spirit, your lustiest wants, your thirstiest thirst, and hungriest sexual desire. TONIGHT . . . RIGHT HERE . . . RIGHT NOW!” There was applause.

The couples proceeded to a huge straw hut. They sat in a circle in the sand. It was clear others had attended before, so the festivities easily ensued. The couples sat in alternating male-female sequence. The gentleman near Laura introduced himself as John while Jasper introduced himself to Carol who sat on his other side.

The host lit three wooden pipes that began to make their way around the circle. Each person inhaled and passed it to the next.

Laura looked at Jasper. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Jasper replied, “No, they’re not kidding.” One of the pipes was about four people away from Laura.

Jasper remarked, “Just take a pull. You’ve smoked weed before, right?”

“Once . . . and only once. I was seventeen years old and in high school.”

“This is what tonight is all about. Being open and free.”

When Laura received the pipe, she took a pull and passed it to Jasper who inhaled quite deeply and passed it on.

As he exhaled, Jasper remarked, “OK . . . problem . . . that was not marijuana.”

“What? You see! Oh my goodness, what did they give us?” Laura whispered.

The woman sitting next to Jasper overheard and responded, “Opium.”

“What? I’m getting the hell out of here,” said Laura as she started to rise. Jasper pushed her back down.

“Relax, Laura. You didn’t even inhale much. Let’s just enjoy the experience. It won’t kill us. We can’t do this at home. You’re safe.”

A pipe was approaching Laura again. They were less apprehensive as the first round since the opium was already causing them to feel mellow.

When Laura received the pipe again, the host began to speak.

“Feel our bonding spirit, our unity, our harmonious being.”

“Go on,” encouraged Jasper. Laura inhaled and passed the pipe to Jasper.

The host continued, “Now let’s explore each other with our sensory capabilities. Touch the person to your left. Anywhere. Any part of his or her body. Just touch. Jasper touched Laura’s leg. Laura reached to John who was sitting to her left and touched his biceps. He positively responded with a smile. Carol rubbed Jasper’s inner thigh and kept her hand in place.

The pipe was making its third and final way around to Laura. She looked at Jasper, and he gave her a nod of assurance. John inhaled deeply and passed it to Laura. By now, Laura was under the influence and decided to inhale deeply as well. She choked a bit and passed it to Jasper who was surprised at how receptive she had become. Jasper enjoyed his smoke and looked at his wife, acknowledging her courage.

“Feel the natural inclination to relax and let your mind and body be free. No inhibitions,” announced their host. “Explore the body of the person to your left.” Hawaiian drums began to sound, and four female dancers jumped into the center of the circle. Jasper began to explore Laura’s body while Carol rubbed his inner thigh with little intimidation. Every now and then, Carol touched Jasper’s groin and licked her lips. Laura continued to touch John, but he was more consumed with the woman to his left. The

entire circle was engaged in a physical exploration. The drums began to beat wildly until finally the music and dancers ceased.

“Now we are all one. Friends and lovers, go forth and discover your earthiest passions within,” the host announced.

Laura and Jasper assumed the evening had ended, but it was quite the contrary. The circle slowly disbanded as the couples moved to the Paradise Ballroom where romantic Hawaiian music played. There were couches around the room, pillows and mats on the floors, and condoms sprawled in crystal dishes on small side tables. Several enclosed spaces with sheer curtains gave the illusion of privacy. The room was a dreamy haven. By this point, the champagne, oysters, and opium had sufficiently made its way into everyone’s system; and the aphrodisiac release began. Laura and Jasper were poised to enjoy the rest of the evening.

Couples who were familiar with the festivities selected a partner and an area. Some couples immediately chose individuals who had not arrived with them. Men and women began foreplay, and some immediately started to engage in sex. In one nook, Laura saw a woman allowing one man to have sex with her from behind while another man simultaneously fondled her breasts and kissed her mouth. In another part of the room, Laura saw one man bent over with a man penetrating his buttocks while another man was inside of his mouth. Then Laura spotted Kathy who was straddled on top of Rob. Boldly, Laura approached Kathy and Rob with a smile while Jasper stayed across the room and watched, interested in what his wife was about to do.

In the spirit of the night, Laura kneeled behind Kathy and, from behind, began to fondle Kathy’s breasts. Laura slowly started to kiss and lick the back of Kathy’s neck. This made Rob even more aroused, and he grabbed Kathy’s waist and increased the pace in which he pushed up inside of her. Kathy moaned in ecstasy. Jasper continued watching from afar and was amazed at the sexual boldness his wife had now exposed. He never saw her so sexually risqué. In some inexplicable way, he was proud to see Laura take charge of her desire. Laura rose from behind Kathy and walked over to Rob’s head and straddled her legs on either side of his face. She wanted Rob to lick her while she perched on top of him. And he did with joyful

pleasure. Laura faced Kathy, and they licked each other's tongues while Rob licked Laura's clitoris intensely and thrust inside of Kathy who pushed down hard for more depth. Then Rob instructed Kathy to ease up, and he put on a condom. Jasper bit his lip from afar as he watched Laura take Kathy's place on top of Rob and begin to push down on him. Laura moaned in excitement grinding and moving up and down on Rob. Laura was enjoying her new sexual mate without fear, inhibition, or guilt.

Jasper knew he must have been high to allow another man to touch his wife. But it was exciting for him to watch Laura so aggressive and demanding unlike the demure woman he knew. By this point, however, Jasper was envious of the pleasure and slowly began to walk over to the threesome to take hold of Kathy when Carol touched Jasper's chest from behind, and he turned around. Carol's body was that of a twenty-one-year-old; she looked like a man's sexual fantasy. Carol put Jasper's middle finger in her mouth, apparently offering Jasper her body. Jasper was somewhat surprised, glanced at his wife who was preoccupied and evidently enjoying herself; hence, he didn't hesitate to concede to Carol. He pushed her long blonde hair to her back and began squeezing Carol's large breasts that stood upright and firm yet soft to his touch. He sucked on them and smacked his cheek with each huge breast gently. Jasper and Carol were in the center of the room uninhibited. He kissed her lips, and she kissed back with ultimate lust and desire. Jasper grabbed Carol's hand and led her to an area that was enclosed with a white chiffon curtain. He reached for a condom while passing the crystal dish and made their way to a pillow bed.

He remained standing with his hands boldly on his waist and his legs apart while Carol got on her knees between his legs and sucked his scrotum. She massaged and sucked in a motion that Jasper enjoyed tremendously. She placed Jasper into her mouth as she stroked and licked his long firmness. Jasper moaned as she was obviously experienced in providing pleasure. Jasper became sexually aggressive at this point which Carol invited. He tossed Carol on her back and massaged her clitoris with his hand. He placed two fingers into her vagina while simultaneously placing a third finger in her anus. She was in ecstasy. He continued a pulsing motion with these three fingers until she had an orgasm. Then he put on the condom and made his way deep inside of her body. Jasper liked when

women had orgasms before entering them because of the intense heat and wetness their body exuded. He pulsed inside of her roughly and firmly. Carol was the only woman in the room screaming loudly in ecstasy enjoying her stranger.

Kathy heard the screams and saw the lovemaking and decided to approach Jasper and Carol. Laura and Rob were heavily engaged in having intercourse at this point with Rob on top of Laura moaning in elation. Jasper couldn't be more pleased than to see Kathy lifting the chiffon sheath and coming next to him and Carol. Jasper wanted to have sex with Rob's wife. Kathy handed Jasper the condom. Jasper kissed Carol who strolled away extremely satisfied.

Kathy was on her hands and knees. Before she was ready, Jasper entered her from behind with a rough force. He wanted to penetrate her right away catching her off guard, knowing the combination of surprise and pain was thrilling. He immediately went deep and stayed deep inside of Kathy grinding inside of her. Like Carol, she too screamed in ecstasy reaching a strong orgasm very quickly that was evident by her tremors and wetness. Kathy had never had a man have sex with her with such conviction and command. He softly spanked and rubbed her buttocks in an alternating motion, offering a painful pleasure combination.

"Oh . . . my. Fuck me. Yes . . . ," she moaned.

Jasper rocked her side to side, opening her up more and penetrating her deeply.

Laura and Rob had both climaxed and were getting up when they saw Kathy and Jasper hugging. They too were now completed. Laura walked over to Jasper as Kathy left Jasper to join her husband. Laura and Kathy crossed paths in the middle of the room as they both thought it was time to claim their respective men.

Kathy whispered in Laura's ear, "Didn't I tell you this was just awesome."

"Well, you did leave out some critical details. But I'm glad you did . . . otherwise, I would have never come."

“Literally.”

“Over and over again.” They laughed. They kissed each other on each cheek.

Laura and Jasper returned to the boutique area to retrieve their clothes as they decided it was time to leave. Kathy and Rob were staying longer. Jasper and Laura were directed to an area with showers. Their clothes were in an adjacent room.

After changing, Laura and Jasper hugged each other and walked toward the beach.

A woman ran behind them shouting, “Miss, sir, you forgot your outfits.” Laura and Jasper looked at each other knowing the experiences of tonight would remain in their past. The erotic clothing represented evidence that they would rather leave behind.

“Thank you, but please do with them as you choose,” said Laura.

“Aloha po,” said the woman.

“Good night,” responded Laura and Jasper, and they continued to walk away.

“What an experience,” said Jasper.

“Experience? That was an adventure.” They smiled and kissed each other.

“This is an insane way to spend our honeymoon. We are truly an atypical married couple,” said Laura.

“I clearly see why couples would return.”

“It’s an opportunity that would be demoralizing anywhere else,” Laura said.

“Yes, indeed. I was surprised at how quickly you embraced being with a woman and having sex with a strange man,” said Jasper.

“Me too. But don’t forget YOUR behavior now. The whole hut heard how you made those women scream. I had to come get you before they

started lining up. I'm glad this is all mine." They laughed. "I can't believe we are starting off our marriage as adulterers. This was insane."

Jasper stopped strolling and looked Laura in her eyes. "While we had fun tonight, it also made me realize I never need to cheat on you. You are more than what I need. Far beyond sex and physical pleasure. I love you immensely, Laura Brockton Cunningham. Our hearts will remain faithful to each other forever."

"And I love you too, Jasper Cunningham. God couldn't bless me with a stronger, ethical force in my life. I am so glad we will grow old together and have babies and more babies and more babies . . ." They hugged and headed back to the limousines to return to the hotel.

Present Day: Return to Laura in the Emergency Room

Within thirty minutes of arriving at the hospital emergency room, Laura and Jasper's baby was delivered via cesarean section.

"We have a healthy baby boy . . . six pounds fourteen ounces and seventeen inches long," announced Nurse Williams to the medical team.

"Let's stabilize her," said Dr. Ramish.

As the nurse increased the dosage of the intravenous medication to stabilize Laura, Dr. Ramish stitched Laura's womb and abdomen. However, Laura's vitals continued to deteriorate.

"We're losing her, people," said Dr. Ramish.

"Pressure is dropping . . . seventy-five over sixty. Pulse is sixty-five."

While the medical team struggled to save Laura's life, Tracey arrived at the hospital. She approached the main receptionist.

"My sister was just brought into Emergency," Tracey lied. "I'd like to know how she is doing."

"What's her name?" asked the receptionist.

"Laura Cunningham. She's eight months pregnant."

"Oh, yes, of course. Please wait right here."

About fifteen minutes passed while Tracey flipped through *Mommy and Me* magazine. She looked forward to raising Laura's baby with Jasper as their own child.

Dr. Ramish came out in his blue scrubs. He extended his hand.

"Yes, are you related to Laura Cunningham?"

"Yes, she's my sister."

"You are the aunt to a healthy baby boy."

"Oh my . . . thank you. Thank you, Doctor."

"However, your sister had many complications."

"Yes."

"We were forced to deliver the baby via C-section. She was unconscious most of the time. Her pressure was a major factor. Her left leg was broken from the car accident, and she had four fractured ribs."

"Did she?" Tracey asked, slightly hypocritically.

"The trauma was too much for her body. I'm sorry, but unfortunately, she died five minutes ago."

"Oh, dear god," said Tracey. Although Laura's death saddened Tracey, the car accident eased her burden of carrying out the plan Jasper had concocted. She cried. Her tears were a mixture of relief, guilt, and confusion.

"Thank you, Doctor. I will relay this information to my family."

"Would you like to see her?"

"Oh. No. I will wait," she paused. "May I see the baby?"

"Certainly. I realize this must be hard for you. Where is her husband?"

"Oh . . . he is not here?"

"No, he is not."

"I will contact my brother-in-law now."

"Please know we did everything humanly possible to try to save her."

“Thank you again, Doctor.”

Tracey was saddened Laura perished but rationalized everything in the manner in which Jasper had expressed when he asked her to carry out the suffocation. Jasper had told Tracey that Laura was unfit to be the mother of his child and that Laura would cause tremendous problems for Jasper and his firm if he divorced her. Furthermore, Jasper said, it was likely Tracey and Jasper would never marry if Laura were alive. Tracey trusted Jasper’s perspectives.

Tracey headed to the third-floor maternity ward and walked to the large holding area where the newborn babies were on display. Tracey looked around at the names of the children, and toward the middle, she saw a sign that read, “Baby Cunningham.” She immediately burst into tears when she set eyes on the caramel-colored baby boy with thick shiny jet-black curly hair. His eyes were almond-shaped like Laura’s eyes.

“You are mine,” Tracey whispered to herself. “I love you, my son.”

Tracey was baffled that Jasper had not been at the hospital. Still unaware that he had been arrested, Tracey tried to call Jasper again at his office, but no one answered. She called his cell phone, but evidently it was turned off, so she left a voice mail message.

“Jasper, you are not going to believe this. Your son . . . our son was born. He is adorable. Call me . . . I’m at St. Mary’s Hospital. Everything is done. All is well.” Tracey sat in the room outside of the maternity ward. She remained there watching the baby, now her baby, and planned what she needed to do in the upcoming days for her and her child.

A nurse walked out from the baby ward and approached Tracey. “Are you related to Baby Cunningham?”

“Yes . . . yes, I am.”

“Please accept my sympathy. Was the mother related to you?”

“Yes. She was my sister.”

“I’m so sorry for your loss. If you would like, we can put you in scrubs, and you can feed your nephew.”

Tracey's eyes brightened.

"Yes . . . I would like to do that. Very much so." Slowly, but excited, Tracey followed the nurse. They provided Tracey with light blue medical attire, and she entered the baby unit. The nurse reached into the clear plastic bassinet and handed Baby Cunningham to Tracey. Her eyes were unmoved. Tracey took the baby and sat in a rocking chair that new birth mothers used to nurse their babies. The nurse provided her with a bottle of baby formula and a burp cloth.

"Thank you." Tracey rocked in the chair and fed her new son. She instantaneously fell in love with him. He stared at her face as he drank his formula, and they bonded.

"My, you have a great appetite. You're like your daddy." Tracey lifted Baby Cunningham to her shoulders and gently patted his back to burp him that he loudly released.

"Yes, you are . . . just like your daddy. You enjoy a good meal and send compliments to the chef." Tracey smiled at her baby. She kissed him on the forehead and sang, "My baby . . . I love you . . . I love you . . . my baby . . . my baby . . . I love you so . . ." The nurse walked over.

"It looks like all went well."

"Oh yes, thank you very much."

"I'll take him now. It's time for his changing."

"May I change him?" asked Tracey.

"What a loving auntie. You sure may. Just place him inside the bassinet, and I'll get the diaper and wiping clothes."

As Tracey placed the baby down, a doctor approached.

"Hello. I'm Dr. Fischer, Laura's obstetrician. I am so sorry for what happened."

"Thank you, Dr. Fischer. I met the emergency room doctor earlier, and he explained the circumstances."

"Is Mr. Cunningham on his way?"

“I was trying to reach him, but I have been unsuccessful.”

“You mean he has no idea about Laura’s death?”

“Nor of the birth of our son.”

“Your son?”

“Well, our family’s son. I am his aunt.”

“This is troublesome.”

Tracey became nervous. The lies were becoming overwhelming.

“Doctor, I think I will be leaving now. I need to locate Jasper.”

“Please do. It’s important that Mr. Cunningham knows.”

The nurse returned with the diaper, and Tracey scurried right past her. Tracey exited the hospital and returned to Jasper’s office building. When she arrived, Jasper’s assistant Jeanette was in the lobby.

“Jeanette, what happened?” asked Tracey. “I’ve been calling, and no one is answering the lines.”

“A group of men came to the office. They said they were the FBI, but they behaved like gangsters. Mr. Gates and Waddell were all bloody.”

“Where is Mr. Cunningham?”

“He was taken away in handcuffs,” Jeanette cried.

“Everything will be fine. Don’t cry. I will speak with you as soon as I learn more.”

The Arraignment

Present Day: Two Days after the Arrest at the Courthouse Jail

A corrections officer entered the holding pen area and shouted, "Jasper Cunningham."

"Yes."

"Officer Burns, please take the prisoner out of his cell and bring him to interrogation room 3."

Officer Williams, who Jasper had befriended, was not around. A tall slim corrections officer with black curly hair opened the metal bars. He placed handcuffs on Jasper and escorted him down the hall.

Jasper longed for a shower and a decent meal for it had been two days since he was arrested.

Interrogation room? he thought. *What the hell are they playing here?*

Jasper entered the room where FBI Agents Lawson and Patterson were standing against either wall. A third agent who he never met told him to take a seat.

"I'm Special Agent James. We'd like to talk with you for a while. Can we get you anything?"

Jasper chuckled, "Can you get me anything? Special Agent James, what is the purpose of holding me here for two days? I have yet to go before a judge? And where is my attorney?"

"Your attorney was detained. He should be here shortly."

"Well, we won't discuss a thing until he arrives," Jasper firmly stated.

At the same time, Jasper's attorney Phillip Cloise entered the room. Phillip was a brilliant, successful lawyer who built his empire from humble beginnings in Philadelphia. After working as a federal prosecutor for two years, he started his own practice in New York. He and his two partners represent clients with criminal, civil, and corporate legal issues. His 1,200

lawyers on staff across the world grossed his firm nearly a billion dollars annually.

Phillip conveyed a strong presence. Although he was not handsome in the traditional sense, when he entered the room, Phillip drew the attention of everyone, standing at six feet five inches and 240 pounds. He was distinguished dressed in a dark gray pin-striped suit with a buff pink shirt and gray-and-white-striped tie. His shoes were deep burgundy with a traditional tassel. His hair was soft and thinning, appropriate for a fifty-four-year-old man that also reflected his Native American descent.

Phillip and Jasper became business partners three years ago. They weren't necessarily friends, but they customarily socialized with the same associates at industry or political events. Jasper had considerable respect for Phillip's legal capabilities; his track record of cases won was formidable evidence of his passion for the law and motivation to win.

The Year 1998

Jasper and Phillip first met at the Fifth Avenue Galaxy Hotel in 1998 when attending a fund-raiser for the National Greenhouse Association. Although neither was particularly sensitive to environmental issues, the affair was a networking and business outreach opportunity where influential congressmen, businessmen, lawyers, and religious leaders gathered and shaped agendas. Senator John Brynner and Jasper were speaking when Phillip caught the senator's eye and walked over.

"John, how are you? It's good to see you," greeted Phillip.

"Phil, how are you?" asked Senator Brynner.

"I'm doing well." They shook hands. "How are Sandra and the kids?" Phil asked.

"The Washington, D.C., lifestyle is starting to wear on them. But I suspect they'll have to deal with it for six more years when I'm reelected." They both laughed.

Senator Brynner continued, "How is your family? Are they seeing more of you, or are you still working your life away?"

“How else will I afford to pay for college for the twins in fourteen years? With the exponential acceleration of tuition, I’ll be working until you pass a bill to reduce the capital gains tax.” They chuckled.

“Listen, based on your client revenues, I am certainly not fooled. You will have established your own university,” remarked the senator.

“Heather and the kids are doing well. The twins are walking, talking, and causing me to lose my hair even faster. But she has the energy for them and me. My older son was accepted to Princeton to study political science.”

“Congratulations. You’ll have a congressman in your home relatively soon.”

“Not if I can sway him.” They both laughed.

“Phil, do you know Jasper Cunningham?” asked Senator Brynner.

“No, I haven’t had the pleasure.”

“Pardon me. Jasper Cunningham, Phillip Cloise. Phillip . . . Jasper.” They shook hands. “Jasper is a young ambitious financial businessman whose potential is limitless. He’s already picking up the top billion-dollar hedge funds in the northeast as his clients.”

“How remarkable and risky. Where is your firm based?”

“I just christened my new office in midtown on Park Avenue in the new Wellington high-rise building.”

“Sounds expensive. Don’t give all your money away to real estate. A client who is pleased with you will want you if you meet their needs whether or not you are based in prime real estate.”

“How true, how true,” said Senator Brynner. “But Jasper needs to be more visible to meet a wife so she can spend all of his earnings.” They all laughed.

“There’s little jest in that statement,” said Phil. “Believe me, don’t rush. I have two wives to show for it.” The men laughed again.

Phil continued, “Actually, my wife is holding one of her seasonal parties at our home next Saturday evening. It’s formal, she’s such a socialite. If

you're free, please come out. We're in Suffolk County on Long Island. There'll be plenty of business and 'personal' opportunities."

"Thank you. I am free next weekend," replied Jasper.

"Give me your business card, and I'll have my wife's planner forward an invite with the details to you."

"Sounds great. Thank you, Mr. Cloise."

"No, please call me Phil. John, it was good to see you," Phil said as he offered his hand to the senator.

"You too, Phil. And I look forward to seeing you on the golf course at the club in a few weeks."

"Careful what you ask for." They laughed.

"Nice to meet you, Jasper," said Phil.

"And you, Phil." Jasper's eyes followed Phil as he walked away immediately admiring him.

The following Saturday, Jasper set out to attend the Cloises' function on Long Island in New York. The affair was black tie, and Jasper chose to wear a contemporary tuxedo.

Jasper drove his dark gray Mercedes S550 for more formality rather than his sporty navy blue Mercedes convertible. He blared a Miles Davis album over the iPod in his car. The song "Amandla" played, and he turned up the volume. It was a relatively warm evening in the fall. He greatly looked forward to the acquaintances he would make tonight. During the week, Jasper researched Phillip Cloise's accomplishments and learned he was truly a success story. Jasper was significantly impressed with how Phillip had grown his legal practice from a five-person firm to a formidable international enterprise. Phillip was sought after to become a legal advisor to the former president a few years earlier, an offer that he declined. A self-made millionaire at the age of twenty-nine, Phillip was not an advocate of politics, but instead a pure capitalist. Jasper wanted to become closer to Phillip and learn from this man who was twenty years his senior.

Jasper pulled up to the Cloises' mansion around 7:15 pm. There were half a dozen valets dressed in red and black receiving the cars upon arrival and driving them to an open area on the property. The home and the grounds were spectacular. It was a twelve-thousand-square-foot three-story full brick home on a twenty-acre lot.

Jasper entered the foyer of the home, and a French servant greeted him.

"Champagne, monsieur?"

"No, merci, madam," he replied. Jasper did not want liquor to impair his judgment. He wanted to be alert, sober, and ready to leap on an appropriate opportunity, if one arose.

The foyer floors were marble, and the ceilings were fifteen feet high. There was soft classical music playing that pleased Jasper's selective ear. Jasper took in the spectacular home partially with envy. This was the lifestyle he was striving to achieve. As he entered the living room, he saw three Van Gogh paintings. He knew the artwork were original pieces. As he walked through the living room into the ballroom, he had to catch his breath. There were crystal chandeliers that hung throughout the room. *How on earth could he afford such a mansion?* Jasper thought. There was a variety of food stations throughout the expansive room and small round tables where folks could eat and socialize. There were cocktail bars placed in four areas throughout the room. The edges of the ballroom opened to an outside patio area. It was warm, and some individuals were having drinks and listening to a live quartet play jazz music outside.

Another server greeted him with hors d'oeuvres. Trays of shrimp, caviar, smoked salmon, and steak tartare were offered. Intent to seek out Phil and meet his associates, Jasper declined and proceeded farther into the Cloises' home. He quickly noticed Phillip across the room and proceeded through the crowd of about seventy-five people. Phillip's presence was strong and commanding. His regal and authoritative voice brought life to the room.

"Jasper Cunningham, you dared to come in spite of our discussion," he joked. Phillip and Jasper shook hands.

"Mr. Cloise, thank you again for the invite," replied Jasper.

“I may be old enough to be your father, but please don’t remind me every time I see you. Call me Phil.”

“Indeed . . . Phil.”

“My wife will be looking out for you. There are likely only a handful of guests here who she will not know.” Phil spotted Heather across the room. “As a matter of fact, she is over there with the cream-colored gown.”

Jasper identified Phil’s wife through the crowd. How could he miss? Heather was five feet ten inches and radiant. She was part Ethiopian and Greek with long thick dark brown curly hair that reached the middle of her back. She had full lips, big round eyes with long eyelashes, thick eyebrows, and slender hands that revealed a four-carat diamond. Jasper was attracted to Heather the moment he saw her. *What wicked game is God playing on me?* he thought. *I was invited here to meet a woman, and of course, the woman of choice belongs to Phil.*

Heather walked over to a party worker who was preparing the fireworks display that was set to launch at 9:00 pm. Jasper stared at Heather, taking in her firm, strong, sensual body. Her grace and confidence were wrapped over sensuality. *Of course, a man of Phil’s stature would have a wife twenty years his junior and as beautiful as her.* For a moment, Jasper imagined kissing Heather and decided to have a glass of champagne to relax.

After Heather had finished speaking with the worker, she looked around, and her eyes locked with Jasper’s. Momentarily attempting to recall Jasper’s face, Heather paused and realized he was Phil’s new acquaintance. She smiled at Jasper and walked toward him. He met her halfway.

“You must be Jasper Cunningham.”

“Is it that obvious?”

“A superior hostess knows her guests. Even those she has not yet been introduced to.”

“You must be Heather Cloise.”

“An unobservant guest would not know his hostess,” remarked Heather. They smiled.

“I had less of a challenge,” said Jasper.

“Is that appealing to you?”

Jasper was caught off guard by Heather’s question. “Is a lesser challenge appealing to me?”

“That’s right.”

“Actually, Ms. Cloise, I wouldn’t dare challenge the wife of a solid legal debater.”

“The wife? Are you implying that my debating skills could not stand on their own?”

“Judging from the intensity of this greeting, I’m sure you are equally formidable.”

“Intensity? Am I causing you to sweat in your tuxedo shirt?”

Recognizing Heather’s blatant challenge, Jasper played along. “Yes. I generally take my shirt off before I sweat.”

“Then why don’t you do so?”

“I may take you up on that offer . . . one day.”

“Vague timing allows an opportunity to withdraw.”

“I can’t withdraw anything I haven’t first deposited.”

“I suggest you accumulate value before you attempt to do so. Enjoy the fireworks, Jasper Cunningham.”

Heather smiled and walked away. Jasper was extremely intrigued by Heather’s verve. He was unable to let her out of his sight. She did not say another word to Jasper the entire evening; however, they exchanged glances intermittently.

Over the course of the subsequent year, Phil and Jasper’s business relationship flourished. Phil was head attorney on the privatization and public offerings of a number of hedge funds, while Jasper’s firm performed the operational risk assessments and ascertained the integrity of the financial statements. They worked closely on the merger of a major

beverage company upstate New York. The transaction was quite lucrative for both of their firms and launched strong momentum for future deals.

A particular merger deal was scheduled to close on November 7; however, Phil unexpectedly had to travel to Hong Kong to close an unrelated deal with a Chinese bank that Central Bank of Boston was acquiring. Phil asked Jasper, who was in the United States, to obtain documents at Phil's home that night, sign them, and immediately fax the documents to Phil in Hong Kong. There is a twelve-hour difference, so to ensure the deal closed on time, Jasper went to Phil's house that evening in order for Phil to receive the documents for his opening day in Asia.

Jasper arrived at the Cloises' home, and the home attendant escorted him to Phil's office. Heather and the kids were not at home. Jasper spent approximately an hour reading the document Phil requested that he review. When he was completed, he signed the paperwork under the name of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell with a tremendous grin as the transaction would secure Jasper's firm \$18 million in fees and personally almost \$4 million. He walked over to Phil's fax machine and faxed the thirty-page document to Phil in Hong Kong. He sat in Phil's burgundy leather executive chair reflecting on the wealth their relationship had created and was energized about the future potential. He was lost in his thoughts when Heather walked in.

"Jasper, I did not know you were in the house," said Heather.

Surprised by her presence, Jasper rose to greet her. "So I am. Phil and I are closing a merger deal, and there were several documents that I needed to address." Jasper stopped talking and didn't realize he was staring at Heather's face. After a few moments, he recomposed. "How are you, Heather?"

"I'm doing quite well."

There was a long pause. Jasper generally was uneasy around Heather. He was fond of Phil's wife but made a concerted effort to avoid giving off any indication of his attraction to her over the past year. He didn't realize it, but he was staring at her lips. They were perfect, he thought. He wanted to kiss her. Heather noticed his stares and broke the silence.

“Is this a particularly busy time for your company, Jasper?”

“Quite frankly, it’s that way all year.”

“Well, then great for you. Are you growing your employee base?”

“My company is not human-resource intensive. We have about two hundred employees. We target high-risk merger deals in industries that traditional consulting firms do not have the expertise and tolerance for providing services. The complexity of what we do has elevated, hence growth in our product offering.”

“So you’ve found your niche here in the New York market.”

“I would say so.”

“Would you like a drink, Jasper?”

“Yes . . . sure . . . that would be nice.”

As Heather walked over to the bar in Phil’s study, two children burst through the doors chasing each other and screaming. They ran circles around the room. It was Phil and Heather’s five-year-old twins.

“Kevin, Kyle, don’t race through the house.” But they continued running and shouting and throwing things at each other in the study.

“Claire!” called Heather. “Please come get the boys and take them up for a bath. They had a long day today.” Moments later, a woman in her forties entered the study. She spoke with a Caribbean accent.

“Come on, children. You can’t interfere in your father’s study. Kiss your mum and let’s go prepare bubble baths.” Claire looked at Heather and then at Jasper curiously. “Hello, Mr. Cunningham.” Jasper nodded his head. The boys kissed Heather, ran past Claire, and headed upstairs. Claire closed the door of the study.

“So let’s see what Phil has in this bar.” Heather walked over to the corner of the room and opened a bar that was stocked with a variety of liquors.

“What would you like?”

“Vodka neat will be fine.”

“That sounds fine to me as well.”

Heather poured the drinks. The fax machine beeped, indicating all thirty pages were successfully delivered.

They sat and talked on the nailhead trimmed cognac-colored leather sofa. Heather shared stories about her upbringing. Heather was born in Ethiopia where her father conducted business and met her mother. She grew up in Greece, her father’s native country. Heather studied law in London at Oxford University where she met Phil when he visited to lecture her class on international corporate law. In short order, Heather graduated from law school and came to work in the United States on a temporary visa at one of the top law firms in the country. Phil was married to his first wife at the time and remained in communication with Heather. In need of mentoring, Heather touched base with Phil on occasion to leverage his legal expertise. The year Heather was due to return to Europe, Phil’s wife became terminally ill with breast cancer and died within three months. Heather reached out to console Phil, and their relationship became romantic. After a two-year courtship, Heather and Phil were married.

Jasper generally refrained from sharing his Memphis upbringing with anyone, and Heather would not be treated differently. He did, however, elaborate on his quest to find the right partner. He conveyed the difficulties in meeting a woman with core values that could be a lifelong mate and that his conservative posture was partially the reason he was still single.

Jasper and Heather finished two rounds of drinks.

“Would you like another?” Heather asked.

“No, thank you. I have to drive back to the city, and the highway troopers will spot me in a minute if I had a third.” Jasper warmly smiled, and Heather smiled back. They silently stared in each other’s eyes and lips. Jasper wanted to kiss Heather immensely but chose not to do so.

“Good night, Heather.” Jasper rose from the sofa, took the documents off the fax machine, and started walking toward the door of the study.

Heather rose and quickly followed him. She touched his shoulder from behind. Jasper turned around, and there was a long pause. Once again, they

stared in each other's eyes mutually desiring one another. The sexual tension was evident; however, Phil was on both of their minds. Heather loved Phil with all of her heart. Jasper had tremendous gratitude to his business associate and the financial opportunities Phil created for him. Not to mention, Jasper never had a positive older male role model in his life that he respected and trusted. But at this moment, Heather and Jasper were less inhibited. Jasper stepped toward Heather and gently pecked her lips. They paused and looked each other in the eyes. Their desire had grown, and they were set to give in. Jasper parted his lips and slowly kissed Heather, and she kissed Jasper back. To free his arms, Jasper released the portfolio of documents that fell on the floor as he held her closely. He smelled her citrus-fragrant neck with strong desire and licked her earlobe. Jasper's hands caressed Heather's face, and he ran his fingers through her silky dark hair and clutched a handful gently as they kissed passionately.

Jasper slowly eased his hands up her black minidress and was aroused when he realized she wore no underwear. It was one of Heather's sexiest behaviors that Phil relished and, apparently, was quite exciting to Jasper as well. Jasper pulled the dress over her head in one swoop to reveal her firm and smooth nakedness.

"Spin around. Let me look at how beautiful you are." Heather obeyed turning a full 360 degrees while playfully striking a pose midway.

Heather's breasts were round and perky. Jasper cupped her right breast in one hand and placed his mouth around her nipples. He sucked gently while Heather held his head in her hands and lavished the movements of his tongue. He parted her legs and massaged her clitoris as he continued to suck her breasts, providing Heather enormous pleasure.

It had been quite some time since Heather had been with a man her own age who made love to her with energy and zeal. Although Phil desired Heather, he seldom sustained an active satisfying lovemaking session. Between his long work schedules, travel, and the side effects of high blood pressure medication, he hardly had the stamina to make satisfying love to her.

Jasper removed his golf shirt, khaki pants, and boxer underwear. He sat on an armchair near the sofa eager to enter Heather's body.

"Heather, come sit on top of me."

Keeping her high-heeled black pumps on, Heather straddled her legs around either side of Jasper and slowly eased down on him. She pulsed up and down to enjoy the pleasurable entry. She moaned in ecstasy as he gently thrust upward.

"Oh, Jasper, this heaven," she softly whispered. "You fill every inch of me. Oh! Oh! Yes . . . this is so good!"

Jasper held her slim waist. He was deep inside of Heather's warm and wet body. He leaned toward Heather and kissed her succulent lips as they made love.

"You're so sexy . . . so beautiful. Hold on to my shoulders and wrap your legs around me." Jasper stood up lifting Heather as he remained inside of her body. He held her legs wrapped around his waist and walked over to the sofa. He eased her down to the edge of the sofa, and he got on his knees. He continued holding both of her legs around him as he made love to her. Heather tried to contain her moans for fear the nanny and her children would hear, but it was difficult. Their passionate lovemaking continued for over an hour as they explored positions and places in Phil's study. Jasper performed oral sex on Heather and reentered her even more passionately. Heather had several orgasms. Jasper climaxed, and they held each for a while speechless until he slipped from inside of her. The room was silent.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have allowed this to happen," said Jasper.

Heather chuckled. "Are you really?"

Jasper looked Heather in the eyes and admitted, "No, I am not. You are a beautiful woman, I wanted to have sex with you the first time I saw you."

"Really? And what stopped you?"

"The dozens of guests present." They laughed.

Jasper began to dress. "I apologized not because I regret having this beautiful evening with you, but because I respect Phil and your family. It

was inappropriate, and I won't allow this to happen again."

"I appreciate your respect for my husband, but I was equally willing. I enjoyed every second of being with you and you being inside of me. You should allow yourself to do the same. This was our special time together and mutually desired in a wonderful way. We grasped a beautiful moment in life rather than allowing it to pass us by. It had nothing to do with Phil or my family nor should it infringe upon the business relationship you have with my husband."

Jasper was surprised by Heather's perspectives and pleased she was so logical.

But Heather had touched a soft side of Jasper that no woman had ever before.

"Jasper, I like you and want to see you again. I can come into the city periodically to be with you. You are what I am missing in my life." Heather touched Jasper's groin area. "THIS is what I need . . . a man able to please me physically without ties."

Jasper was taken aback by her candor and disregard for him. "Excuse me, Heather, but I am not a stud," Jasper seriously remarked.

"Trust me, I am not looking for a stud. I very easily can have most any stud I choose. Don't you agree?" Jasper remained silent and allowed her to lead. "As I said . . . I like you! That makes it all more pleasurable. I know you like me." She chuckled and confidently said, "You're passionate over me. I can tell. You said you felt that way the first time you saw me."

In an attempt to shelter his bruised feelings, Jasper replied, "No, I said I wanted to have sex with you the first time I saw you." Jasper refrained from revealing his sentiments. He was unable to allow himself to be emotionally exposed.

"Do you like me?" Heather asked.

Jasper walked over to Heather who was still naked and kissed her lips without answering her question with words. He planned to respond with more lovemaking. He began sucking her breasts again.

“Yes . . . Jasper . . . I want more . . .” Jasper removed his pants and turned Heather around on her knees spreading her legs apart. He penetrated her from behind, and they both were uncontrollably orgasmic. Jasper hugged her tightly. When they were through, he resumed dressing.

“You can be really good for me,” remarked Heather.

Jasper was insulted again. “Is this only about you?”

“What do you mean?”

Jasper became defensive and decided to reverse the tables. “You like me to fuck your pussy, don’t you?”

Heather did not reply. She felt insulted by his profanity and vulgar tone.

“I can do as you wish if that’s what you want . . . every week for that matter. But don’t say you like me and ask me if I feel the same. I could lie to you and tell you that I love you for that matter. How’s that . . . I love you. Happy?” he said sarcastically.

“You son of a bitch!”

“No . . . you bitch. You want me? You want me to fuck you at your whim?”

Heather raised her hand to slap Jasper in the face, but he grabbed her arm in midair before it landed on his cheek.

“You see? This is why I will refuse going any further with you. You will ruin all that I have with Phil by over-emoting.” Jasper dropped her arm forcefully. He walked over to where the portfolio and papers had fallen on the floor, picked them up, and started to exit the room.

“How DARE you?” said Heather.

“No . . . how dare you!” Jasper approached the door.

“You walk out that door and I swear I will do everything and anything in my power to ensure Phil doesn’t send a single client your way ever again!”

Jasper stopped in his steps but did not turn around. He suddenly realized how naïve he was being. Of course, a beautiful young woman like Heather

controlled an appreciative older man like Phil. Jasper was playing this all wrong. She could do so much more for him and his business. Was he crazy? He risked a future opportunistic relationship with the woman who could control Phil's actions, or she could potentially jeopardize all he worked to build with Phil.

Jasper remained still but did not turn around. Heather continued, "I thought that might strike a chord. Don't play altar boy with me." She chuckled as she knew she was in control. "Men with your ambition never cease to amaze me. You're slow . . . but you get it."

Jasper continued facing the door and said, "Is this what you do? Literally fuck Phil's partners? You flash that pink pussy in their face, give them a whiff, and they're all yours?"

"Don't be so quick to judge. I didn't do anything. You wanted a taste. Don't blame me if you like what you ate," Heather smirked. "I'll speak with you next week."

Jasper couldn't respond. For the first time, a woman had silenced him. Strangely, however, he wanted her more for her forceful, honest demeanor. Jasper left without looking back.

Heather and Jasper continued their affair on a regular basis for months. Jasper dreaded attending functions where Heather escorted Phil since Jasper wanted Heather on his arm. Heather loved Phil and did not confuse Jasper's purpose in her life. It was purely sexual—passionate lovemaking. Jasper went along with the free-form noncommittal relationship, and much to his surprise, he fell further in love with Heather's strength and logical way of accepting the relationship on its own accord. But he refused to acknowledge outwardly his sensitivities and desire to her.

About one year after their relationship began, Heather called Jasper with a trembling voice.

"Hey, Jac, how are you today?" Heather privately called him Jac, representing his initials.

"Busy today. I thought you were leaving for the beach house yesterday."

“It’s over, Jac. They are going without me.” She couldn’t hold back her tears any longer.

“Heather, what’s wrong?”

“I won’t be going to the beach house with Phil and the boys this weekend.”

“Heather, what are you saying?”

“Phil asked for a divorce.”

“What happened?”

“I need to speak with you. Are you free?”

“I’ll clear my calendar. Meet me at Fuzio’s restaurant on Fifty-fourth Street at 6:00 pm.”

Jasper arrived at Fuzio’s fifteen minutes late; however, Heather was not yet there. He ordered vodka on the rocks while he waited. As he sipped his drink, he saw Heather walk in distraught. She kissed him on the lips and sat down.

“What’s going with you and Phil, Heather?”

“I’m pregnant, Jac,” Heather said nervously.

Jasper paused for a moment digesting the link between the divorce and the pregnancy.

“Is this our baby?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“How could you be so sure?”

“Jac, Phil and I have not had sex in nearly a year. And before that instance, even longer. I stopped pressuring him to make love to me when you and I started our relationship. I think he suspected I had someone else, but it didn’t seem to bother him. Yesterday, he saw my home pregnancy test results in the bathroom garbage. I suppose I subconsciously wanted him to see . . . I’m not sure. He confronted me, and I was honest. This morning, my obstetrician confirmed my pregnancy.”

“How far along are you?”

“About two months.”

The waiter came over to hand menus. Jasper and Heather did not look at their menus and were silent for a while. Jasper rubbed his temples persistently. Heather patiently waited to hear Jasper’s views. The waiter returned.

“Can I get you a drink, ma’am?”

“I’ll have a pineapple juice.”

“Another for you, sir?” Jasper was silent not acknowledging the waiter. “Sir . . . would you like another vodka on the rocks?”

“Please,” answered Jasper.

Jasper breathed a deep sigh and pondered Heather’s news. Phil was a major source of revenue for Jasper’s firm. Together, Phil and Jasper generated a 40 percent increase in legitimate revenues for Jasper’s partnership last year alone. Jasper did not want to jeopardize the potential business growth. Furthermore, Heather was not the innocent virgin he sought out as the woman in his life. Nevertheless, although it was hard for him to admit, he loved Heather. He had never been with such a strong, vibrant force in his life. No other woman had the free spiritedness and maturity that she embodied. Although he took pride in precisely calculating his actions and would never make decisions based on his emotions for a woman, she was carrying his child.

Jasper held her hand. “Heather, I love you. I want you and our baby to be a family.” Jasper was uncharacteristic. But the thought of a child, possibly a son, overtook him.

“I love you too, Jac.” She placed Jasper’s hand on her abdomen. “This baby is a product of our unexpected love.”

They looked over their menus. “What are you in the mood for tonight?” he asked.

“I’m having the angel hair pasta dish. How about you?”

“Veal marsala.”

There was a long pause, and Heather said, “Phil will fight me for custody of the twins.”

“I’ll make sure we get the legal representation to ensure that does not happen.” Jasper was not confident in his words. Phil was one of the most remarkable legal minds in the country, and Jasper knew Phil would win any fight. Furthermore, Jasper surmised that since Phil previously suspected Heather was having an affair, Phil had likely secured evidence for a potential divorce or custody battle. They ate dinner, and Jasper shared how they would handle Heather’s departure from Phil.

“Return home and behave as though you are not leaving Phil. When Phil returns from the beach house with the kids, explain to him that you are not going to keep the baby and how apologetic you are. Put Phil’s mind at ease. You need to get a hold of Phil’s travel calendar. When Phil leaves for his next business trip, pack clothes and necessities for you and the twins and go to my lake house upstate.”

After their plans were set, they left the restaurant and went to Jasper’s condominium apartment on the upper west side. Heather sat on the sofa emotionally drained. Jasper turned on the CD player and inserted a Miles Davis CD. Jasper poured a cognac for himself.

“Heather, your options are limited. Would you like some milk?” They laughed. “What would you like?”

“Any juice will be fine.”

Jasper joined Heather on the couch with their drinks. Jasper was beginning to think more rationally.

“Heather, I want you to understand that the separation, custody fight, and eventual divorce will all be extremely difficult. Phil has many friends in the legal system and beyond.”

“Nothing worth having comes easy.”

“Heather, no clichés here. This is serious. You can possibly lose custody of Kevin and Kyle.”

“I won’t—”

Jasper interrupted, "Heather, you're not getting it. Nothing is assured. Earlier today, you mentioned Phil likely knew you were having an affair. If I were Phil, I would have had you followed. If I were Phil, I would have had pictures taken. If I were Phil, I would ensure that you and your lover did not make a fool of me in front of my friends, family, and colleagues. Phil is a powerful man, Heather."

"Stop it already!" There was a long pause in the room. They could only hear the ticking of Jasper's walk clock. Jasper finished his cognac. Heather broke the silence.

"Do you think he knows the affair is with you?"

Jasper rubbed his eyes and stood up. He walked toward his bar for another cognac. "I suspect he does. I just don't understand why he didn't confront me."

"Oh god, what have I done?"

"You haven't done anything," Jasper replied in an unsympathetic tone. "We simply fell in love and became carefree. There's a consequence for all actions, Heather."

The reality of the lost custody battle became apparent to Heather.

"I won't lose my sons. I can't lose my children."

Jasper proceeded in a matter-of-fact manner, "Perhaps we should reconsider. Is the cost of having this baby worth losing your marriage, Kyle, and Kevin?"

"Jasper, please don't say this. Don't ask me to abort our baby."

"Heather, I am not asking that at all. I love you. But you have quite a bit at stake here including the lifestyle you've enjoyed for years. Phil is a very wealthy man. Everything could be pulled out from under your feet. I have far less to lose."

"Jasper, hold me." Jasper held Heather tightly. She began to cry. Jasper went to the bathroom and returned with tissues for her. She regained composure.

“Jasper, I will hire top attorneys . . . the best that I can afford. Just stay with me. It’s time that I recognize that my marriage to Phil is not a union at all. It’s a façade . . . for others, for the social events . . . worse of all . . . for the supposed happiness of the children. I love Phil’s friendship, but I deserve more. He too deserves more. Kyle and Kevin deserve more. My feelings for you are far greater than those I have for my husband. Quite honestly, our unborn child is the necessary motivation I need to leave Phil now. I should have left him a long time ago. When we married, he was in pain from the loss of his first wife. I was a safety net, and he was always so good to me. I loved his friendship, and I confused that with the love of a husband. I’ve had a number of affairs before you, Jasper. I was searching for satisfaction. I thought the gap was physical, sexual, but you’ve made me see that I was missing much more than sex. I was missing a deep-rooted connection with a man whom I could love unequivocally. A man who I could open my inner spirits, wants, desires, and fears. A man who I could ask, ‘What do you think is your calling in your life?’ And he would not have a profit motive as his first response. I started off thinking you would supplement my life. But in fact, I need you to hold me and rub my neck every night and ask me how my day was. To tap my butt when I walk past you in shorts as you watch a football game. To kiss my lips just because . . . I need you, Jasper Cunningham, because you give me the attention, joy, and love that I deserve. And I want to do the same, if not more, for you. I don’t want to be squeezed in between business trips and late nights at the office. I’m lonely without you, Jasper. Every time I leave you after our time together, I spend days looking forward to the next kiss. There is such hollowness inside that it scares me. Only you can fill it. A year ago, I was seeking a sexual mate in you, but instead I’ve found a loving, passionate man who I yearn for every day.”

As Heather expressed her desires, Jasper thought that he was not different from what she had not liked in Phil. He admired Phil. Phil was his mentor. He was working toward a similar lifestyle. Would she later be disappointed in him as well? Jasper needed space to think.

“Heather, you should get some rest.” Heather held Jasper and kissed him.

The next morning, Heather left Jasper's apartment and went home to Long Island. When she arrived, there was a handwritten phone message from their housekeeper indicating that her parents in Greece had called. Her father was severely ill, and they requested that she return home immediately. Heather attempted to call her parents, however, to no avail. Phil was still at the beach house with the children and would be there for another four days. She figured she would go to Greece for a few days and return home around the same time with Phil. Heather called her travel agent to book a flight to Greece the following night. However, her travel agent said that Mr. Cloise had already contacted them and that her tickets for a departure that night were waiting at the airport for her. Heather called Phil at the beach house.

"Hi, Claire, are Phil and the kids around?"

"Oh, hi, Heather. Mr. Cloise was trying to reach you all night. They are out on the yacht. There has been an emergency with your brother in Greece. Apparently, your brother was in a car accident, and they would like for you to come home as soon as possible.

"What? Oh my goodness! I can't get hold of them."

"Mr. Cloise said your parents would be in transit from vacationing in Switzerland. Where were you last night, Heather? I was trying to get the kids to speak with you. You didn't even answer your cell."

"I had some things to take care of."

"Well, Mr. Cloise said he did not want to speak with you if you called nor did he want the children to talk with you. What's going on, Heather?"

"Did he say that, Claire?"

"I'm sorry. He had someone book your tickets for Greece. Call your travel agent."

"I did. Thanks, Claire."

Heather hung up the phone. There was clearly confusion with the messages. She had the handwritten message that her father was ill, and Claire indicated that her brother was in a car accident. She went upstairs to

pack some things for her trip. Heather left her home that night to go to the airport to board a plane to Greece. Heather never returned to the United States again.

Present Day: Two Days after the Arrest, Back in the Interrogation Room

FBI Agent Lawson arrogantly stated to Phil, “We have tapes of Jasper Cunningham’s discussions in his offices at Cunningham, Gates & Waddell that support the charges. We have built several cases. Furthermore, there is a retired judge from DC who will provide evidence to charge him with conspiracy to commit murder.”

“Please leave my client and me here alone,” said Phil to the FBI agents. The room cleared, and Jasper and Phil sat across from each other alone.

“Jasper, I told you for years to keep your business legitimate . . . not to go after the fast money. The wealth will come. What the hell happened?”

Jasper rubbed his temple hard. All Jasper could focus on was the FBI agents’ claim of conspiracy to commit murder.

“I’m being framed, Phil . . . set up.”

Phil slammed his hand on the table and shouted, “Don’t give me that bullshit! Don’t play innocent with me. The stock market was lucrative over the past couple of years, but your company outgrew the pace twenty times over—”

Not quite paying attention to Phil, Jasper responded, “Listen, Phil, I need you now. Have you heard from Laura?”

“Jasper, I just got off a plane from Chile. I received your message and came straight from the airport.”

“Thanks, Phil. I appreciate it. Laura’s in the hospital. I don’t know how she is right now. I haven’t heard from anyone. And I’m hearing all sorts of things that sound crazy.”

“Like?”

“Like conspiracy to commit murder charges!”

“All right . . . calm down, Jasper. I need to take a close look at the charges and supporting evidence. First, tonight we’re going before the judge to be arraigned, and I’ll plea for your bail.”

“Phil,” Jasper grinded his teeth, “get me out of this pit!”

A half an hour later, Jasper was in the courtroom before the judge with Phil at his side.

Court Officer: Case number 65789042. The federal government against Jasper Anson Cunningham. Please approach.

Jasper walked from behind the holding bin area with Phil at his side.

Judge: What charges are presented against the defendant?

Prosecutor: Your Honor, the federal government charges Jasper Anson Cunningham with fourteen counts of embezzlement, twenty-four counts of intentional fraud and deception of investors, seven counts of money laundering, and one count of conspiracy to commit murder.

Jasper: Who? What are you talking about?

Phil: Quiet down, Jasper.

Judge: How does the defendant plea?

Phil: Not guilty on all charges.

Prosecutor: We ask that the defendant be held without bail.

Phil: Mr. Cunningham has a prestigious auditing and consulting firm in which he is the lead partner. We ask that he is granted bail in order to run his business.

Prosecutor: His business is precisely the reason we ask for him to be held without bail. His business operations are deemed unlawful.

Phil: These are only allegations, Your Honor. Many clients rely upon his investment opinion to make decisions. All of the partners at the firm have been arrested. There are over four hundred employees whose livelihood depends on him. He also has a wife who is eight months pregnant currently in the hospital as we speak.

Prosecutor: The defendant is a wealthy man with homes in various cities and has connections overseas. He represents a flight risk.

A court officer walked into the courtroom and handed the prosecutor a note who thereafter handed it to Phil. After shaking his head, Phil whispered in Jasper's ear. Jasper pounded the table with a firm fist.

Prosecutor: We just received word from St. Mary's Hospital that the defendant's wife, Laura Cunningham, was killed in a car accident. Given the death of his wife, we may need to revisit whether the charges elevate from *conspiracy* to commit murder to manslaughter.

Jasper became hysterical. In spite of his desire to end Laura's life, the reality of her demise was extremely difficult for him to accept.

Jasper: What the hell is this insensitive jackass talking about? I need to get the hell out of here! Phil, fucking get me out of here. My wife . . . my son . . . I need to find out what happened!

The judge banged his gavel.

Judge: Mr. Cloise, please contain your client from further outbursts.

Phil: Your Honor, under these unusual circumstances, we respectfully ask the court to grant bail so that Mr. Cunningham may attend to his personal affairs.

Judge: Based on the alleged crimes, Jasper Cunningham is barred from conducting business for Cunningham, Gates & Waddell, LLC. The evidence suggests it is also unclear whether or not Mr. Cunningham may have a hand in the death of his wife. Furthermore, given his access to global locations, it is uncertain whether or not he would leave the country. Therefore, the defendant will be held without bail.

The judge banged his gavel.

The court officer took Jasper back to the holding bin. Phil walked with them.

"I'd like to speak with my client in private for a while," said Phil.

They entered the client-attorney room and sat down. Jasper was silent but furious.

“I need to talk with you, Jasper. There are some deep-rooted agendas involved in this arraignment today. You should have been released. What do I need to know that you have not disclosed to me?” Jasper did not respond. “Jasper, what the hell is going on here?”

“Phil, what fucked up defense was that? You couldn’t even get me out of this jail! You didn’t even fight for me, Phil!”

Phil sighed deeply and sat back in his chair with his arms across his stomach. For years, Phil suspected Jasper engaged in illegal activities. Phil kept distant from the behavior but continued to work with Jasper since they had great chemistry and profit-making capabilities. But beyond the business, Phil knew Jasper was unethical and untrustworthy.

“Jasper, I kept doing business with you because I never allowed my personal views to cloud my work.”

“What are you talking about, Phil?”

“Jasper, I knew all along that you had a long-term affair with Heather.”

Jasper was stunned at what Phil was saying but remained silent and fixed on Phil’s next words.

Phil continued, “I was actually quiet about your affair with my wife because I had rather share her silently with you than some other man who I didn’t know. I was close enough to you to watch your every move with her. And I knew you would take care of her physically in ways she needed without emotionally harming her.”

First of all, Jasper thought, why is Phil raising this now? At a time when he needs Phil the most? And just how much did Phil actually know? Did he know about Heather’s current whereabouts? Jasper treaded cautiously.

“Where is Heather, Phil?”

Phil ignored Jasper’s question. “But when Heather became pregnant, it was heart-wrenching. The reality of another man having an illegitimate child with my wife was too much to contend with.”

“Phil, what are you saying . . . now of all time.” Jasper shook his head in confusion. “Phil, are you going to defend me?”

Phil continued to ignore Jasper as he was lost in his thoughts.

“Phil!” shouted Jasper. “Are you no longer defending me?”

“I was able to tolerate an affair, but I could not have the two of you live happily ever after.”

Everything seemed to be crumbling around Jasper.

“Phil, can we address this later? We need to discuss the strategy for my case.” Phil did not reply.

Jasper realized he was not going to get through to Phil until he addressed Phil’s concerns about the relationship with Heather. Jasper continued desperately.

“Phil, I didn’t know you knew. I tried to stop seeing Heather—” Jasper paused. “Heather is . . . was . . . a wonderful woman. I tried to stop the affair on several occasions. I couldn’t refrain from seeing her . . . making love to her. It became far more intense than I ever thought it would. I fell in love with her Phil.” Phil did not respond, appearing almost trancelike. “Phil, why are we talking about this now?” Jasper shouted, “LAURA IS DEAD, I DON’T KNOW WHAT HAS BECOME OF MY UNBORN SON, I’M IN JAIL, AND I HAVEN’T SEEN HEATHER IN YEARS. WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU WANT ME TO SAY, PHIL?”

“I don’t want any justification, Jasper.” Phil pretended to smile. “We are business partners, and right now, I need your ass out of handcuffs so I can spend more time on the golf course in St. Lucia.” Jasper looked at him with serious eyes.

“Jasper, I told you . . . warned you to keep your business affairs legitimate . . . not to heed to temptation. What happened? Talk to me about these charges.”

Jasper sat rubbing his temples. His eyes were red, and he was heated. “First and foremost, I did not harm Laura. She is . . . oh god . . . was the purest thing in my life. She loved me in spite of everything. She was carrying my firstborn son, for God’s sake. Do you think, for one minute, I could jeopardize my child, my heir, my son? I don’t even know if he is dead

or alive.” Jasper jumped out of his seat. “Listen, Phil, get the fuck out of here and find out what’s going on!”

“Jasper, stay calm. Keep your cool. Look, you know it doesn’t matter what I think. We need to deal with the embezzlement and fraud charges as well.”

“Phil, every moment you are here is a moment lost out there . . . please . . . go. Read those case files and figure out what the hell is going on.” Phil stood up, took his briefcase, and looked Jasper in the eyes.

“I’ll see you in the morning. This will work itself out. I’ve seen it a hundred times over. Young black businessman wants it all—every million-dollar deal, a loving, faithful wife, two kids, a sexy woman on the side, influential friends. When he becomes wealthy, living the American dream, he gets targeted . . . for everything. Then in the end, he implores his friends for aid. Back to his people! The same people he fucked when he climbed that mountain. Literally.” Phil opened the door and sarcastically remarked, totally out of character, “Let’s stick together, my brother.” And Phil made the sign of a fist to Jasper.

Confused by Phil’s remarks and behavior, Jasper replied, “Phil, I don’t need the Malcolm X monologue. Just let me know what—” Phil closed the door before Jasper finished his sentence.

Say Good-bye

Laura's funeral was held on a sunny Tuesday morning. There were over one hundred people standing near Laura's gravesite at Maple Oaks Cemetery in Westchester, New York. Although it was chilly outside for May, the blueness of the sky and sun rays warmed and comforted the mourners.

Six days had passed since the arraignment, and Jasper remained imprisoned. He received special court privileges to attend Laura's funeral service and the wake that was held the prior evening. The prison officers who accompanied Jasper were dressed in dark suits and, if it weren't for their police-like demeanors, fairly inconspicuous. Jasper was handsomely dressed in a black Armani suit, white shirt, and gray-and-black tie that Tracey purchased and brought to the prison. Tracey could not gain access to Jasper's home, and Laura's family did not accommodate Jasper's multiple requests, particularly since they did not want him to attend. Tracey was in the midst of the crowd wearing a double-breasted knee-length chocolate-colored raincoat with a matching pillbox-shaped hat.

Laura's parents and brother stood a significant distance away from Jasper. They firmly maintained that Jasper was responsible for Laura's death. Her father reflected on the last time he spoke with Laura when she expressed that she discovered Jasper was plotting to kill her. Through all of the ex-judge's investigative efforts, however, the district attorney could not elevate the charges from conspiracy to commit murder.

Jasper looked around the crowd at the mourners. He locked eyes with Laura's best friend Eva. She conveyed despise and anger for Jasper.

The prior evening, Eva nastily insulted Jasper in front of their family and friends. Over two hundred mourners were throughout Jasper and Laura's home. Although most of Laura's family lives in Washington, D.C., and California, Jasper demanded that the services were held in New York. Since he was incarcerated, he could not travel out of state. Eva catered the food and drink and ensured everyone was comfortable.

The Wake the Previous Night

Laura's priest Father O'Brien had just completed a prayer service and left the home. Jasper positioned himself in the central area of the family room. He clapped his hands to regain everyone's attention.

"Good evening, everyone. I sincerely thank you all for coming to express your love and concern to the Cunningham and Brockton families. I know how deeply you all cared for Laura and her generosity, kindness, and warmth that filled all of our lives. Certainly Laura was taken from us far too soon." Jasper looked at his father-in-law who turned his head and walked out the room into the kitchen. Jasper cleared his throat and continued.

"I loved Laura with all of my heart. I am still in shock from the suddenness of her death and the injustice I am currently contending with." Jasper walked over to his mother-in-law who was holding his son. "My newborn son, my firstborn, Magnus Alexander Cunningham, who Laura will never know, will keep Laura's kind, gentle spirit living on." Jasper kissed Magnus on his forehead and handed him back to Laura's mother.

As Jasper spoke warm words about Laura, Tracey lovingly watched Magnus, reflecting on their bonding moments after his birth at the hospital. She envied the physical love Laura's mother gave to Magnus. She smiled at Magnus from afar wishing his eyes could catch hers, but he was far too young. *Don't worry, my son, Tracey thought. It's only a matter of time before you, Daddy, and I are together as a family.*

Jasper continued, "My love for Laura—" Eva interrupted Jasper.

"Your love?" Eva mockingly shouted. "You son of a bitch. How dare you? Your love? The only love you have is for your pitiful self and your corrupt firm." Jasper looked at Eva with animosity.

"You never loved Laura. You never KNEW Laura in order to LOVE Laura. She was a woman in deep pain and fear, both of which were caused by your physical and mental abuse." Jasper remained silent. It was clear Eva had been drinking, and Jasper hoped she would embarrass herself at some point.

Eva continued, "I spent more quality time with Laura than you ever did. She shared her deepest emotions with me. You forbade her from going on vacation with me. She talked about the nights when you would not come

home due to overnight layovers in Manhattan. You wouldn't answer her phone calls, and no one knew where you were. Then there were the business trips to Europe where you were sighted with women who were wearing nothing resembling business attire. Laura confided in me about the days you selfishly ignored her wants and needs." Eva became emotional. "Yes, Jasper . . . she also told me about the multiple of times you sexually forced yourself on her. The days and nights when she refused to sleep with you yet you held her down against her will and forced your way on her. Pregnant or not!"

Laura's father overheard Eva's comments from the kitchen and charged into the family room toward Jasper. He took a swing at Jasper's jaw. Jasper ducked, and he missed. With Magnus in her arms, Laura's mother jumped up and screamed, "Mark! No!" Jasper stood in place nonaggressive. Magnus cried. Tracey ran over to Mrs. Brockton to take Magnus away from the theatrics.

"Let me bring Magnus into another room," suggested Tracey. Preoccupied with the events, Mrs. Brockton handed Magnus over to Tracey to tend to her husband.

"And what about your plot to murder my daughter," Mark Brockton shouted as a couple of men grabbed his arms to hold him back. As they escorted him out the room, he yelled, "If it's the last thing I do on God's given earth, it will be to ensure you are punished for the misery you inflicted on my daughter. She deserved a million times better."

"Not once did I ever harm Laura," Jasper defended. "I gave her a great life. She had all that money could buy. Did Laura ever say to you that she was unhappy? Answer me! Mother Brockton, Laura loved you like a friend as well as a mother. Did my wife ever confide in you that I as much as scratched her? Or that I stopped her from doing anything that she chose to do with her life? Or instead, did she tell you about her shopping sprees all over the country . . . the world for that matter? Did she tell you how excited she was about having my son? Did she ever tell you that I questioned her trips with Eva? I encouraged the vacations. Laura stopped going on her own accord. She made her own choice after Eva made a sexual proposal to my wife. I had nothing . . . absolutely nothing to do with her decisions. Laura

loved me!” Jasper banged his chest. “And I loved her. So you, Eva, stop your damn lies and insinuations in my home, particularly as we mourn.”

Tracey was in the dining room with Magnus in her arms listening to Jasper profess his unity and love for Laura. She was unable to determine whether or not Jasper was being truthful, but it sounded heartfelt. But Tracey wasn’t too upset since Laura was no longer in the picture. Tracey continued to rock Magnus in her arms. *This is my son*, Tracey thought. *No matter how Jasper felt toward Laura when she was alive, she is gone, and Jasper will be freed from jail soon.* Mrs. Brockton walked in, interrupting Tracey’s thoughts.

“Thank you for taking Magnus.” Mrs. Brockton reached out her arms to take Magnus. Tracey ignored her arms. Puzzled, Mrs. Brockton gestured to Tracey again who unwillingly handed him over.

“I don’t believe we met. I am Laura’s mother, as I’m sure you’ve already concluded.” Tracey’s heart pounded quickly. She was unsure what to say. Not to mention, she was irritated and wanted her baby back.

Tracey jumped out of her chair intentionally attempting to avoid an introduction. “Yes, of course. It’s a pleasure to meet you. Please accept my deepest sympathy during what must be a very difficult time.”

A suspicious Mrs. Brockton tried to keep Tracey in the room. “Thank you, thank you very much. But I didn’t catch your name.

“My apologies. I’m Tracey. Tracey Bodden.”

“Were you friends with Laura?”

“I’m actually Jasper’s investment banker.”

“Oh?” Mrs. Brockton found it odd that his investment banker would attend the wake and behave so personally integrated with the family.

Tracey noticed Mrs. Brockton’s facial expression and responded, “I thought I would be remiss if I hadn’t come to express my condolences.”

Mrs. Brockton continued to look at Tracey suspiciously. “Personal banking, I presume?”

“Pardon me?” asked Tracey.

“No, pardon me. Thank you for expressing your sympathies. Have you been Jasper’s banker long?”

“I’ve done business for Cunningham, Gates & Waddell for several years now.”

Mrs. Brockton continued to question Tracey disbelievingly, “Did you ever meet Laura?”

“Yes, I did.”

“When, where?”

“I handled some of their joint investments as well. We conducted business at Jasper’s office.” Magnus began to cry. Tracey appreciated the distraction. “Oh, I think he’s hungry,” said Tracey.

“I’m sorry, Ms. or Mrs. Bodden?”

“Tracey is fine.”

“Tracey. Do you have children, Tracey?”

“No, I don’t.”

“Well, you know and handle them very well.”

“He’s a loving boy.” Tracey looked at Magnus with warmth. Mrs. Brockton noticed Tracey’s fondness and became further distrustful.

Tracey continued to stare at Magnus. “You’re pretty attached to my grandson, I see.”

“Like I said, who could ask for a sweeter baby?”

“Yes.” Mrs. Brockton watched Tracey’s trancelike state over Magnus that further heightened her suspicions. “Pardon me, but are you more to my son-in-law than his banker?”

“Excuse me?” Tracey asked defensively.

“You seem to have a very intimate familiar way about you.”

“I was raised in a small town in Alabama by relatives who were originally from an even smaller island in the Caribbean. I’m just open with

my heart, particular around children.”

“You must find living in a big city like New York challenging?”

“At times I do.”

Mrs. Brockton resumed probing. “Are you here in NY alone?”

“Yes.”

“You are such a lovely young lady. I’m sure there’s someone out there for you.” Mrs. Brockton noticed Tracey looking away at the family room where Jasper was sitting.

Tracey’s eyes remained on Jasper as she said, “I’m not sure what fate has planned for me, but there is a man that I love. The relationship is complicated.”

Mrs. Brockton watched Tracey’s expression and concluded her suspicions were accurate. She confidently asked, “Are you in love with my son-in-law?”

Tracey paused and looked Mrs. Brockton in the eyes. Tracey wondered how she could have guessed. It was hard to find the words. She couldn’t lie. In a broken voice, Tracey responded, “I think I will leave now. It was nice to meet you.”

After feeding Magnus, Mrs. Brockton walked to Jasper’s study where he was now sitting.

“Jasper, am I intruding?”

“No, not at all, Mother Brockton. Please come in.”

“Jasper, Laura’s gone now, and the circumstances have hurled me into a state of deep sadness for the loss of my only daughter and fear for the future of my grandson.”

“Is it fair to say that my fate is not one of your concerns?”

“Mark and I are concerned over Laura’s last conversation with him before she died. Her words were clear, ‘you were plotting to kill her with your whore’. We don’t need Socrates to interpret those words.”

“My son shouldn’t have to listen to this.”

“Stop avoiding the issue.” She maintained a conversational tone. “Your son is one week old and hasn’t a clue in what we are discussing.” She paused. “I just met Tracey Bodden a few moments ago.” Mrs. Brockton closely watched Jasper’s bodily expression. “I don’t think I would be off base to say she is your mistress.”

“Is that what she said to you?”

“I don’t need to hear the words explicitly. Much of what is said is unspoken. And I suspect that she is likely ‘the whore’ Laura referred to in her conversation with Mark before she was killed.”

“I’d appreciate if you handed my son to me and left.”

“I will not leave this home. This is my daughter’s home just as much as it is yours, and Magnus stays with me.”

“Everything your daughter owned, every dress, car, and stocking for that matter came from my work.”

“Laura had her own money before she married you.”

Jasper laughed out loud facetiously. “Her own money? Do you honestly think that the few dollars she had could have afforded any of this empire I built?” Magnus is frightened by Jasper’s raised voice and started to cry. Mrs. Brockton put a pacifier in his mouth.

“Listen, Jasper. My purpose is not to incite any confrontation. But how dare you invite that woman to my daughter’s home . . . to my daughter’s wake?” Tracey overheard the arguing, walked over, and eavesdropped outside the study.

“I don’t know why you are prying into my personal affairs,” Jasper asked.

“Personal affairs? She said she was the investment banker for your company. That’s not supposed to be personal affairs to me.”

“I personally get to know anyone who handles my money.”

“It’s quite obvious.”

“Mother Brockton, this is not the time or place. We are mourning my wife’s death.”

“You have DISGRACED Laura’s memory by bringing that woman into Laura’s home!”

“MY home! You want to see the mortgage checks I wrote? Eleven thousand dollars a month from MY account. Not hers.”

“Is everything about money to you, Jasper?”

“YES,” he admitted. “Yes it is.” Mrs. Brockton shook her head, and Jasper continued, “That’s right. I hate how you benevolent philanthropic types try to behave as though money is so meaningless or dirty. It shapes us all! Money will dictate whether you attend Harvard University or Community College and, therefore, your earning potential for the rest of your life! Money will shape whether you live in a ghetto tenement or a comfortable twelve-thousand-square-foot home in the suburbs. Money will dictate whether you work as a professor for a fine university, such as yourself, or scrub floors for someone who is presently one of your colleagues. Money will drive whether you live in a cardboard box on the street or in a home like yours. So don’t you dare ask me whether or not money is everything from your bourgeois position in life!”

“Jasper, I feel sorry for you.”

“You should. I’m locked up in prison for crimes that I have not committed.”

“You simply cannot see past yourself can you? YOUR life and YOUR circumstances. What about your deceased wife? What about your infant son?”

“How the hell am I supposed to concentrate on anything or anyone else when I am in a cage? Confined?” Mrs. Brockton shook her head at Jasper in pity.

Jasper was fed up with his mother-in law and demanded, “Where’s Tracey. You said you saw Tracey?”

“How dare you! How dare you ask me for your mistress! How dare you insult the memory of my daughter by having that woman in my presence, holding Laura’s son?”

Jasper dismissed her comments and looked away.

“Mark was absolutely right about you. You are a selfish, sorrowful person. I can’t call you a man because you don’t have an ounce of manliness in your body. I would hate to know the pain you inflicted on my daughter during her years of marriage.”

Tracey continued to listen intently outside the door.

“I loved Laura. I loved Laura with all my heart.”

“Yet you cheated on her, lied to her, and made her life a living hell. So much so that she was ashamed to tell me? Her father? I believe Laura’s girlfriend Eva. Do you love that woman out there?”

“Yes, I do. Tracey provides me with more than Laura ever could. I never chose for the marriage to come to that, but it was the reality.” Jasper held his head in hands. “Oh, God, forgive me for saying this.”

“You monster! How could you mention God?”

“Just leave now,” commanded Jasper.

“I will not leave until I have some more answers. Were you plotting to kill my daughter with that woman?”

“Please . . . just leave.”

Tracey walked in and said, “Mrs. Brockton, you should go now. Jasper is upset.”

“Young lady, I am doing all in my power right now to refrain from slapping you in the face. GET OUT OF MY DAUGHTER’S HOME!” Tracey looked at Jasper and walked over to his side.

“Mother Brockton, give Magnus to Tracey and leave!”

“Absolutely not! I am his grandmother, and I will not let him out of my sight.” She looked at Tracey. “Young lady, you do not know the man you’re dealing with. He’s cunning. He’s beyond shrewd. You’ll get what you

deserve at his hands. The two of you will never have Magnus. Mark and I will ensure that you don't have any right to him in spite of your supposed power." Mrs. Brockton left the study with Magnus in her arms to join Mark.

Tracey looked at Jasper. "Are you OK?"

"How the hell could I be OK? Look at my life, my business . . . my family."

"Jasper, we are a family. We will surpass this hurdle before long."

"Tracey, this is not just a hurdle. This is a massive obstacle that places my life at stake." Tracey put her arms around his neck.

"You and I know that you did not embezzle any money from your clients. I see all of your business transactions. I know that nothing illicit was going on. I can certainly testify on your behalf to clear this up right away. And this conspiracy to commit murder charge is all predicated on one phone call to her father. He won't be a credible objective witness to any jury." Tracey comforted Jasper and kissed him on the lips. "I will stand by you through all of this. I love you. We will be a family soon, and your business will resume operations. Don't concern yourself about how bleak things appear at the moment. It is only temporary."

* * *

Jasper saw three men at the funeral that he had not known. His instinct warned that they were not Laura friends, and therefore, he watched them closely.

Father O'Brien began the funeral service with The Lord's Prayer. Laura's mother walked to the casket, and she kneeled the entire time. Laura was dressed in an ivory chiffon dress. A picture of her newborn baby Magnus was beside her.

The choir soloist sang two hymns: "Precious Lord Take My Hand" and "Amazing Grace." There was a procession to the casket to wish final farewells. Jasper stood by the casket as each person walked past Laura's body where they placed a single white calla lily.

As the three unusual men Jasper spotted earlier approached, he felt tension. He concluded that they were not there to mourn. As the first man walked past, he whispered in Jasper's ear, "Antonio Ignacio says return his money and you won't be in a box like your wife."

The second man passed and said, "But just in case you have doubts—" He pulled out a switchblade and stabbed Jasper in the left side. Jasper fell grabbing his side where blood spewed. People began to scream and scramble.

Laura's father held his head in shame at the disgrace Jasper brought to his daughter's funeral. He walked over to Jasper as he lay on the ground and remarked, "I wish you WOULD die."

The prison officers grabbed Jasper and dragged him into the backseat of their car. They put on their car sirens and sped to the city hospital as Jasper bled from his abdomen. Tracey followed the prison officers' car to the hospital where she was not allowed to visit Jasper since he was in isolated custody. Tracey approached the guard.

"How is he doing?" asked Tracey.

"Excuse me, ma'am. Who are you?" the guard responded.

Tracey froze and could not reply. She thought, who was she? What could she respond? *I am his lover?* No. She did not have any legitimate personal connection to Jasper. *I'm his banker?* Tracey knew the guard would laugh at her and ask her to leave. The newspapers printed stories each day about the multiple women Jasper courted globally. Worse than that, she thought, the guard might call a reporter anxious to get a sensationalized story. Tracey left the hospital and drove to her condominium. She was deeply troubled by the uncertainty of her future with Jasper and Magnus. She asked herself, why were people targeting Jasper, such a caring, loving man who only wanted the best for everyone?

Jasper had lost a considerable amount of blood, but he needed only eight stitches to repair the wound he suffered. The stabbing did not impact any of his organs. Jasper deduced the stabbing was merely a warning from Antonio. If those men wanted to kill him, he would be dead.

Laura's parents returned to Washington, D.C., following the funeral. The New York City family court awarded temporary custody of Magnus to the Brocktons until Jasper's criminal case was resolved. Laura's father, however, was dedicated to working tirelessly to ensure Jasper would never be awarded custody of Magnus and that Jasper remained in prison for the rest of his life.

As Jasper lay in the hospital bed waiting to be transported back to jail, he felt his entire life was an enormous false state of being waiting to explode. He was a weakened man stripped of the most critical aspect of his life—power.

Legal Introductions

Present Day: Three Weeks after the Arrest

Jasper waited in the client-attorney room for a meeting with Phil. Jasper was concerned that there had not been much progress made in the case since he had not heard from Phil after the night of his disturbing arraignment. While Jasper waited, a mysterious visitor arrived at the jail to see him.

The sensual Latin woman was five feet five inches and wore three-inch brown alligator pumps. Her hair was jet-black, long, and straight falling in the middle of her back. She wore a beige fitted suit with gold-colored buttons and an ivory lace camisole peeking through beneath. Her skirt stopped at the knee, and her sheer black hosiery made her legs appear sensual. When she entered the room, Jasper could smell her perfume. She carried a slim black briefcase with information related to Jasper's case.

"Mr. Cunningham?" she asked with a Hispanic accent.

"Yes, I am. And you are?"

"I am Samantha Santiago from Edwards, Edwards & Cloise."

"Where is Phil?"

"Mr. Cloise is unable to continue on your case, Mr. Cunningham. I am your attorney going forward. I have studied your case closely, and I am here to aggressively pursue your innocence."

"Pursue my innocence? Get Phil back on the case now and cut your ridiculous bullshit with me. I am too long in this game to start dealing with an amateur who thinks she can come to me looking as though she should be sucking my balls and expect me to respect and trust her with my life. I don't even know who you are."

Unbeknownst to Jasper, three weeks prior, the Ignacio family threatened Phil and asked him to step aside for his safety and that of his twin sons. Hence, he removed himself from Jasper's case.

Samantha stood in front of Jasper with conviction. “Calm down, Mr. Cunningham.”

Jasper lost control. “Fuck you, lady! Don’t tell me to calm down. Fuck you!”

His inability to control matters was closing in on him. He felt pressure in his temples. The throbs ached, and the veins became swollen. He was visibly angered by the change in his defense attorney.

“Get out of here!” he shouted. “I will get a new law firm to represent me.”

“Mr. Cunningham, your case has been reported all over the news. The only attorneys who would be interested in representing you are those looking for self-notoriety . . . any notoriety—win or lose. They would want to create a name for themselves. Mr. Cunningham, you have embezzled millions of dollars from organized crime, conspired to kill your wife—”

“That is very presumptuous of you! I did not have my wife killed nor stolen anyone’s money!”

“That is yet to be proven. Mr. Cloise no longer wants to represent you,” Samantha lied. “He is fostering a career as a potential Supreme Court justice, and successfully defending you will not further his plans. He is interested in benevolent popular opinion cases at the moment as opposed to the controversial nature of yours.”

Jasper was silent.

“Do you, sir, want me to represent you or not?” Jasper shook his head and rubbed his temple.

“I am asking you again. What the hell do you want, Mr. Cunningham?” asked Samantha.

Jasper stepped away from Samantha. He knew she was right. Who could he trust? He rubbed his temple firmly as the pain increased. He sat in the room and pondered over Phil’s abandonment and that he was not positioned to seek another attorney. Why hadn’t Phil called to let him

know? He appreciated Samantha's candid view and judgment. Certainly Phil would send a solid replacement for his representation, he thought.

"Look, I don't know you," Jasper began softly. "And no matter how many briefs, hearing documents, or newspapers you have read, Ms.—"

"Santiago," Samantha assisted.

"Ms. Santiago, you certainly do not know me. I won't take any bullshit defense."

"Mr. Cunningham, I am strongly qualified to be your counsel."

"Where did you attend law school?" he asked.

"Yale."

"Where did you rank in your class?"

"Twelfth out of 327 graduates," Samantha responded but did not appreciate the questioning.

"How long have you been an attorney?"

Samantha replied apparently irritated, "I have been an attorney for seven years. I passed the bar exam in the 90th percentile. I was editor of the school law journal. I was law clerk to Chief Justice Marcus in Boston, Massachusetts. I have successfully defended sixty-six out seventy-two felony cases in my professional career. I am the first female partner at Edwards, Edwards & Cloise at thirty-four years old. What the hell do you want to know?"

"You lost six cases?" Jasper sarcastically asked.

"Go to hell, Mr. Cunningham."

"Call me Jasper."

"Call me Ms. Santiago."

Samantha returned to visit Jasper three times a week for several months to prepare for the trial. He became comfortable with Samantha's strategies for his defense. Jasper was also impressed by Samantha's intellect in spite of her teasing attitude at each meeting. Tracey visited him every other day

primarily complaining about the amount of time that had passed without Magnus and demanding to know his defense strategy. Jasper became fed up with Tracey's pestering and asked her to stay away while he dedicated his energy to the trial.

One week before a pretrial hearing, Samantha arrived on a Sunday morning in a cream-colored strapless linen dress with a wide orange belt and wide-rimmed hat. She wore orange pumps and carried a slim black briefcase. When she entered their meeting room, Jasper was aroused by her sexual presence and was unable to concentrate on his case. It had been months since Jasper had kissed a woman. Jasper spent many nights fantasizing about kissing Samantha. He suspected she would not reject him if he had done so.

"Good afternoon, Ms. Santiago," he said playfully.

"Good afternoon, Jasper."

He looked at her outfit closely.

"Are you mocking me, Ms. Santiago?"

"Mocking you? I haven't said more than a greeting to you."

"Not in your words, but in your dress."

"How so?"

"I see you are wearing an orange belt and shoes to match my jumpsuit."

They laughed together.

"You are lovely indeed, Ms. Santiago."

"Thank you." He pressed his body against hers and kissed Samantha. He sucked her tongue slowly, and she did not resist.

Pleased with the positive reception, Jasper backed Samantha up against the wall. He inhaled her scent. Samantha was quite surprised and overtaken by his aggressiveness. She had been intent on seducing Jasper for a while, patiently acknowledging all that was at stake, but started to think her hopes might be a lost cause. She was thrilled that he finally succumbed to his feelings.

Jasper dropped to his knees and put his head under her dress. Jasper held both of her slim legs in his hands and licked inside her thighs. He lifted her dress to reveal her red thong. He put his head between her legs and used his tongue to move the thong to the side sucking her hungrily. Samantha tried to remain quiet since the corrections officers were close by up the hall. She was astonished by the joy he was bringing to her. She was so wet, her nipples became erect, and she quivered losing an attempt to remain composed. Jasper rose.

“Samantha, you are delicious,” he joked.

“Give me more.”

Jasper looked her in the eyes as he eased his right hand up Samantha’s dress and penetrated her with two fingers. He wanted to make her happy in spite of his constraints. And he knew how. He never denied his ability to make passionate love to a woman until she begged, even screamed for more. She relished his actions rapidly moving her body up and down. Her thin strapless dress easily allowed him to pull down the bodice and expose her 40D breasts. He licked around her large brown nipples teasing her and continued to pulse his fingers inside of her. He pushed deeper, in and out, massaging her clitoris as she held back her moans.

Samantha lost control of her discretion. “Make love to me, Jasper. Right here. Right now.”

“No . . . we’ll get caught.”

“Make love to me, Jasper. I want to feel you inside of me . . . if only briefly. I want you . . . now . . . within.”

Jasper quickly brought Samantha to the table, lifted her, and sat her on the edge. He parted her legs and looked her in the eyes. “It’s been so many months since I’ve been with a woman.”

“Then have me. Take me now.”

While standing in front of her, Jasper gradually entered Samantha’s body. His slow pace built Samantha’s desire for him.

“More,” Samantha begged as she firmly grasped and held his muscular cheeks. “Deeper . . . now.”

“Samantha, you are beautiful. Oh god, I want you so much,” he said as he rapidly increased his pulse inside of Samantha. With heat and passion, he plunged inside of Samantha expressing his pent-up longing for a woman. His orgasm was filled with intensity; he could not breathe. He stepped away from Samantha, frustrated with his situation, and punched the wall. Jasper was overcome by frustration. The confinement in prison and uncertain destiny was far too much to continue. Samantha walked over to him and held him from behind. She warmly hugged him and kissed the back of his neck. Jasper turned around to face Samantha wanting more of her fiery body. He lifted Samantha up, and she straddled her legs around his waist, and he penetrated her again while he held her in the air.

Totally ambivalent to her surroundings, Samantha openly submitted her body and sentiments to him. “Oh, Jasper. You are so strong. More . . . more . . . love me. I want you so much. Love me.”

Jasper squeezed Samantha desperately reflecting on his imprisonment and the likelihood he would not have this risky opportunity with her anytime soon. He wanted to make love to Samantha for the entire day licking and kissing her deeply until the footsteps and keys jingling up the hall brought the reality of his situation back to life. They abruptly stopped and adjusted their clothes. The corrections officer peeped in and continued walking without asking any questions. Jasper threw a folding chair across the room.

“I can’t take this degrading bullshit any longer!” Jasper paced for a while contemplating as Samantha continued adjusting her appearance. “Samantha, I have done many things to many women, most of which was at their expense and my gain. Let’s win this case so I can be with you and take care of you like royalty.”

“Jasper, what are you saying?”

“Plea for my bail at the pre-trial next week.”

“Jasper, it would be difficult. Justice Walters is presiding. He’s a friend of your father-in-law.”

Jasper held Samantha tightly.

“Samantha, plea for my bail. I need to be released so that I can address many loose ends. I am a very wealthy man, Samantha. When I am found innocent, I will make you my wife. I need a woman like you at my side. Who can I trust but you?”

Samantha paused. This was the offer she had hoped for all along but she remained calm.

“I’ll prepare the motion. I will do my best.”

Jasper kissed Samantha hard and lovingly.

She opened the door, looked back at Jasper, smiled, and walked away.

Where Is My Money?

Two months before the trial, Tracey sat at her desk in her investment banking office and stared at a manila folder in her hands. She accidentally picked up the file from Jasper's desk on the day of the arrest when Laura unexpectedly walked into Jasper's office. Tracey was unaware she had the file for months. Tracey opened the file and read it again as she had done dozens of times before.

"In the account of Jasper Cunningham . . . Danske Swiss PLC Account number 6548A2, six hundred million three hundred thousand dollars."

Tracey was unaware Jasper illegally laundered funds for his clients. She now believed the legal charges were founded.

"How could he keep this from me? What kind of man is he? Oh my god, I was going to kill for him. What kind of woman am I?"

Tracey closed the file and held her head in her hands. It was after 10:00 pm. She took the elevator down to the Park Avenue side of the building and hailed a taxicab to her condominium located ten minutes away. Although her apartment was nearby, her energy levels diminished after she first spoke with the district attorney's office earlier in the month. She was subpoenaed to testify for the government at Jasper's trial. The district attorney called her in to rigorously prepare for the testimony over the course of the past two days. As defense attorney, Jasper knew Tracey was on the witness list for the prosecution, and he further ostracized her from him.

The taxi arrived at Tracey's apartment. She paid the \$6.40 fare with a \$10 bill and exited. As the taxi pulled off, she walked into her building lobby. Her doorman was watching the Mets baseball game on a six-inch-screen television.

"Good evening, Ms. Bodden."

"Good evening, Dan."

Tracey pressed the elevator button and arrived at the twenty-sixth floor. She put the key in the door, dropped her briefcase on the foyer table, and closed the door. Tracey was not a big eater, but she needed to have dinner

since she skipped lunch. She opened a bottle of Pinot Grigio, put a seasoned salmon steak in the oven, and reached for a bag of prepared salad from the refrigerator.

The apartment was dimly lit, reflective of Tracey's emotions, and she wanted to keep it that way. She was depressed, thus the mood in the apartment felt appropriate. She had not called her cleaning lady in weeks, and the fresh floral arrangement she usually kept on her dining table was dry and wilted. Tracey entered the bathroom and ran a jasmine essence bath. She undressed in the bathroom and got into the bathtub with her glass of wine as the salmon steak roasted. While in the tub, the doorbell to the apartment door rang. *Who on earth is that?* she thought. She paused and figured it was Ellen down the hall.

Tracey stepped out of the tub dripping wet and put on her terrycloth robe that was hung on the back of the bathroom door. She entered her living room, and to her surprise, the apartment door started to open, and two men entered. Tracey did not know these men. She screamed and ran toward the phone. One of the men dashed behind her, grabbed her right leg, and she fell to the floor. The second man spoke, "We are not here to hurt you, Tracey. Your boyfriend Jasper has a significant sum of money that he stole from my uncle's company, and I am here to find out where he put the cash."

"I can't help you," Tracey said in a courageous voice. Tracey struggled to get away. She was still wet from her bathwater and was trying to slip through his grip. "Why would you come to me?"

"You are his investment banker and his mistress. You could provide him with many alternatives to benefit the two of you."

"Well, you are wrong. I don't have any information or knowledge of your money."

At the same time, the first man who was holding down Tracey's legs slapped her in the face splitting her lip. She cried out and held her bleeding mouth.

"Why are you doing this to me? I don't know anything," she cried.

“Tie her up,” said the second man. They grabbed a kitchen chair and sat Tracey on the chair. She wrestled, but her efforts were in vain. The struggle caused her loosely tied robe to open, revealing her naked body.

“You are a pretty enticing woman,” the first man gloated.

“Leave her alone,” said the second man. “We are here to obtain information on my family’s money.”

“Yeah, but look at that body,” hankered the first man.

“Go to hell,” Tracey shouted. With those words, the first man slapped her again in the face. Tracey’s lip was now bleeding at a steady pace. She licked the blood from her lip. He tied her to the chair with string and placed silver electric tape on her busted mouth.

The second man began to search the apartment rummaging through Tracey’s bookcases and drawers. He entered Tracey’s office and turned on her computer.

“What’s your password?” shouted the second man from the adjacent room.

“I just taped her mouth down. She can’t talk.”

“Well, take off the goddamn tape and have her answer!” The first man ripped off the tape, and Tracey shrieked in pain. He put his fist to her mouth.

“I’ll only ask you once for the password. If it doesn’t work, I’ll break your jaw. What is the password?”

“Georgia107,” Tracey replied.

“Georgia107!” he shouted. He replaced the tape on Tracey’s lips and stood over her. He intentionally kept her robe open to view her body. Tracey grimaced at the thought of what he might possibly do to her. She hated Jasper more for subjecting her to this humiliation and harm. She resented the lack of trust and everything she had committed herself to doing for him, for them, for her misconception of their future.

The first man was erect from looking at Tracey’s round smooth nipples, and he touched himself while glaring at her.

“You are a fine piece of ass. You ever been with a real man?” He bent down closer to her face, stuck out his tongue, and slowly licked some of her blood that dripped on her chin.

“See . . . I just want to make you feel better. You just behave yourself, and you won’t cause any more pain.”

He rubbed her right breast with his left hand. His square gold-and-diamond pinky ring sparkled in Tracey’s peripheral vision. Tracey was repulsed by his touch and turned her head away.

“Oh . . .” He closed his eyes. “You feel so soft.” He opened his eyes and looked at Tracey. “Is this how your uppity bastard boyfriend touches you?” He intentionally squeezed her breast harder and harder. Tears ran from her eyes. He pressed his hand on his erection that was protruding from the crotch of his pants quite visibly. Tracey feared his next move.

“Your little jailbird boyfriend has done this to you. Not me.” Tracey looked at him in disgust.

“Yeah . . . that’s right . . . look at me, you fine piece of pussy . . . with those fiery eyes.” He rubbed himself with a pulsating rhythm while gripping Tracey’s breasts.

“Oh yes. You are sweet. You want to suck me, baby? You want to suck me?” He unzipped his pants to reveal his large sweaty erection. Tracey was struggling to free herself from bondage; her arms still tied to the chair and her mouth taped.

He whispered in her ear. “See . . . if I take this tape off your mouth to give you a taste, you might just like it. But you also might scream and disturb my partner in the other room. You foxy, cocoa piece of pussy. You will like it though. Oh yes, cocoa. You will like it.”

The second man continued searching Tracey’s computer drives for any information that might reveal the location of the bank accounts. He was unaware of the horrific scene transpiring in the other room.

“I can’t have you scream. See . . . my boss in there will get pissed off at me. But I know what he doesn’t know—that you want me,” he smirked as he was sexually aroused and wanted Tracey in a brutal way.

Tracey's eyes grew wider, and she shook her head indicating no. He roughly squeezed both of her breasts, and she jerked away. He became angry and punched her in the nose. Tracey's lip and nose were now bleeding.

"You see? You like that, don't you? Oh . . . I see, you want it rough." Then he whispered in her ear, "Come on, keep resisting. Make Manny happy."

Manny kissed her bloody nose where it dripped. He licked the blood and rubbed his tongue on her nipples. He thereafter sucked the blood off her nipples with a gripping suction that made Tracey push her head back.

"See . . . just calm down and let me take care of you. Jasper . . . that fuck . . . never took care of you. He couldn't take care of . . . he couldn't take care of a feisty woman like you."

Manny stepped back for a moment and dropped his pants and boxer shorts to around his ankles.

"Now, relax, let me take care of you, cocoa." Manny became violent again. He slapped Tracey over and over again. He untied her from the chair, but her wrists remained tied behind her back and her mouth taped. He threw her onto the floor. Tracey kicked him incessantly as she tried to crawl away from him on her back. He grabbed both of her legs simultaneously and forcefully held them apart. She tried to break away, but he was overpowering. He knelt on the floor between her legs, grasping the flesh of her thighs in his hands to keep her legs apart.

"Cocoa, your pussy looks so sweet . . . clean-shaven and smooth. Just like a little girl. You know you want me little girl—rough and wild."

He continued to grab her thighs so hard he dug into her flesh. He used his legs to help keep her legs spread apart. He grabbed her right leg over his shoulder and jammed himself inside of her. She was tight and dry, and he tore her. Tracey shook her head side to side and cried in agony. Manny slapped her again as he raped her brutally, forcing himself inside of her, ensuring every inch of his sweaty body was banging inside of Tracey. He pushed and pushed harder and harder, and Tracey continued to cry. He punched her hard in the face and broke the bridge of her nose. Tracey

fainted. He continued to rape her while she was unconscious. Her wrists were tied and mouth gagged. He flipped Tracey around on her stomach and forced himself into her buttocks tearing her there also.

“Oh my, cocoa,” he said as he brutally raped Tracey. She was bleeding all over him still unconscious.

“Don’t you enjoy this?” But no reply. “I bet your uppity bourgeois bastard never gave it to you so good.”

The second man walked into the room.

“Manny, you fucking animal,” he screamed. “What the fuck are you doing? What the fuck did you do?”

Manny withdrew from inside Tracy who was facedown and limp on the floor.

“Sol, she asked me for some.” He pulled up his underwear and pants.

“You son of a bitch! Is she alive? What the fuck! I knew I shouldn’t have brought your street ass along with me.”

“Sol, come on. Did you see her clean-shaven cunt . . . those breasts? Why don’t you take a piece too?”

“You crazy son of a bitch! Check to see if she is breathing.”

Manny bent down and turned Tracey over.

“Yeah, she’s breathing,” said Manny as he looked at her naked body. Tracey was still unconscious. “Damn you, Sol. I didn’t even get to come inside her pretty cocoa ass.”

“Stop your crazy bullshit! We are here for a purpose, you crazy fuck! I need to find where my uncle’s money is located! Goddammit, control yourself, you asshole! Now get some water and wake her up!”

Manny went to the kitchen and ran a cup full of cold water. He walked over to Tracey and splashed it on her face. But no reply.

“Shake her,” said Sol. Manny shook Tracey’s head from side to side yet still no reply.

“You fucking idiot! What did you do? Get some more water!”

Manny refilled the cup with cold water and slowly splashed it on Tracey’s face. She awakened. Sol pulled the electric tape off Tracey’s mouth. She was barely coherent.

“Look . . . don’t scream,” said Sol. “I couldn’t find anything on your computer. Tell me what you know, where the money is, or I will let my partner loose on you . . . for hours if necessary. And he will fuck you and beat your ass the entire time, if necessary. He’s mad at me because I stopped him.”

Tracey did not respond. She was not completely aware of what was transpiring.

“OK. I will leave. I will come back in three hours. My buddy here is going to stay. I am not sure what he is capable of, but if I exit that front door, a broken nose and a busted lip will not be your only problem.”

Tracey feared for her life. She screamed out in a weakened cry, “It’s in my briefcase in the foyer.”

“Manny, imagine that. She has answers! Perhaps your dick is a truth serum.” The two men laughed.

Tracey surmised that once the men received the information, they would kill her. Therefore, she believed it was her last opportunity to be saved, so she screamed as loud as she could, “Help me!”

“What the fuck is wrong with you, bitch?” asked Manny. He pulled out a .38-millimeter gun and knocked Tracey in the temple with the handle. She passed out again.

“Damn, Manny!” shouted Sol. “Couldn’t you wait until I found the documents?”

Sol searched Tracey’s briefcase and found the manila folder with the bank account information.

“Jack . . . fucking . . . pot,” exclaimed Sol. “Let’s go.”

“No, let me pop her in the head. She’s going to ID us,” said Manny.

“We did not come here to kill her. That was not part of the job. Besides, I doubt it. She was in on this shit too.”

“Then let’s get the fuck outta here,” said Manny. “Who knows who the fuck heard that bitch’s scream.”

The men entered the back staircase and left the building.

An hour later, Tracey regained consciousness. She awoke in a daze with blood all over her body. She slowly recalled what had happened. Her apartment smelled of smoke. She crawled to her door and screamed in a weak voice, “Someone . . . please help me.” At the same time, her smoke detector alarmed. Her salmon steak was burning. Her neighbors heard and ran to her aid.

“Tracey! Oh no . . . oh my god . . . someone call 911!” shouted her neighbor Ellen.

The ambulance arrived within ten minutes and rushed Tracey to the hospital. Although she was badly beaten, she was conscious. She suffered a concussion, broken nose, and needed stitches on her top lip, vagina, and anal wall. She had deep bruises on her inner thighs, and both of her eyes were black and blue.

As she lay on the hospital bed in the emergency room area, a man spoke from the other side of the curtain.

“Tracey Bodden, I am Detective Anthony Shaw. May I speak with you?”

Detective Shaw pushed back the curtains that surrounded her. He entered and closed the curtains behind him. “I am so sorry for what happened to you tonight. Ms. Bodden, I can only suspect how difficult it is for you to speak. I’d like to ask you some questions about the incident. I will try to ask only ‘yes or no’ questions. A shake or a nod will due.”

“First, I’d like to know whether you would like a female officer to join us.” Anxious to get the questioning over with, Tracey shook her head indicating she did not.

After the detective finished his questioning, Tracey fell asleep for several hours. But when she awoke, unbeknownst to the hospital staff, Tracey exited the hospital at 11:00 am the next morning. She was barely able to walk, and her speech was slurred. Her face was bruised, swollen, and revealed bandages that covered her stitches. She hailed a taxi and headed to Riker's Island to confront Jasper.

Tracey arrived at the visitor's conference room where Jasper was waiting. Tracey slowly approached Jasper angry and in tears. Other visitors and inmates watched Tracey gradually step past visibly beaten. As Tracey approached Jasper, he stood up in disbelief.

"How could you have this done to me?" she asked.

"Dear god, Tracey, what happened to you?"

"What happened to me?" Tracey's speech was slurred. "You thieving motherfucking liar. Your mob friends came to my condo last night. They wanted information on money you stole from them." Tracey cried louder, "I was beaten! I was raped. Oh god, Jasper." Tracey burst out into tears uncontrollably. Jasper walked over to console her. When he touched her, she became violent punching and kicking Jasper in her weakened state. Jasper attempted to hug her again, ignoring her resistance.

"Get off me!" Tracey pushed him away. "I hate you! I hate you!" she cried. Tracey wept for about five minutes in Jasper's arms. When she recomposed herself, she realized that she needed to warn Jasper. "They took the file with the bank account information. They know where the money is located. I gave them the file. They were going to kill me." Jasper stepped back and contemplated Tracey's words.

Tracey continued. "How could you do this to me? I thought you loved me. We had plans. Plans for a life together," she cried. "You didn't protect me from those evil bastards. I could have been killed."

A corrections officer entered the room.

"Is everything OK in here, ma'am?" the officer asked.

Jasper replied, "We are fine, Officer."

“I wasn’t talking to you. Ma’am, are you OK?”

Jasper spoke louder, “I said we are fine.”

“Listen, you. Keep your mouth closed before you end up with the general population of prisoners. I heard today that your two partners didn’t fare to well in that ward.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jasper.

“Your two partners that were arrested with you, Gates and Waddell, they each took a bullet to the head this morning.” The corrections officer walked off pleased that Jasper had not yet known about his partners’ tragic murders.

Tracey shrieked. “Oh my god, this is a nightmare! Jasper, what were you, Jonathan and Mark involved with? Why would this happen? I gave them the account information last night,” she said naïvely. “Why would they continue to pursue. You bastard liar. When were you going to tell me?” she asked in disbelief.

“What . . . what are you saying?” he asked sternly.

“I hate you. I despise you. You are a despicable son of a bitch, liar, and thief. How could I have ever loved you? How did I ever—” Tracey cried more. Jasper walked over to her and put his arms around her to console her. After five seconds, Tracey pushed him off.

“Get off me!” she shouted. “You monster! Get off me!”

The corrections officer returned. “All right, enough over here. Miss, you will have to leave now. Jasper, wait here for us to get a CO to bring you back to your cell.”

“I detest you, Jasper Cunningham,” she said as she walked off. “You are going to get yours, you devil.” Tracey exited the room with the corrections officer. She waited at the top of the aisle to sign out and leave when she heard the officer speaking to a well-dressed woman.

“Hello, Counselor,” said the officer.

“Good day, Officer.”

“You won’t have to wait. Jasper is already in the conference room. He just had a visitor.”

“A visitor? Who may I ask?”

The officer turned to Tracey. “The woman sitting right alongside the wall. She hasn’t left yet.”

Samantha walked over to Tracey.

“Who are you? What affairs do you have with Jasper Cunningham?” asked Samantha.

A battered, frail, and unsteady Tracey stood up. She was barely able to speak.

“I am a reporter,” Tracey lied.

“Guards! Please make sure this reporter or any other reporters do not visit my client again.” Samantha turned to Tracey. “Judging from your bruises, I see you must have tried to get one story too many.”

“Are you new, Counselor?” asked Tracey.

“Get the hell out of here, lady!” exclaimed Samantha who turned her back away and strutted down the hall in her three-inch heels to see Jasper.

Tracey turned away. She clearly understood this woman was more than Jasper’s counsel. Tracey decided to revisit the district attorney’s office to share as much information as possible.

The Wednesday afternoon prior to the trial, Corrections Officer Evans approached Jasper while he was playing chess with another inmate in the game room. Jasper became good friends with him over the course of the ten months. He offered information to Jasper knowing he was a man of power and in the hopes of being compensated for his generosity if Jasper was freed.

“Hey, Jasper. I have to speak with you,” said Corrections Officer Evans.

“I am about to call checkmate on this brother.” Jasper had adopted the jailhouse lingo. “Can it wait?” Jasper asked.

“No, it can’t.”

Jasper rose and walked down the hallway with the corrections officer.

“Is this about my trial tomorrow morning?”

“Well, it’s much deeper.”

“Then stop delaying, what’s going on?”

“It’s your attorney.”

“What? Is Phil asking to get back on the case?”

“No, man.”

“Will you speak up then?”

“It’s the female Latin attorney.”

“Samantha?” Jasper asked uneasily, “What the hell happened to Samantha?”

“Man, you’ve been played.”

Jasper is listening intently. “By whom? What are you talking about?”

“She is on the payroll of the Ignacio family. Word has it that she’s Antonio Ignacio’s whore trying to get back in good with him. Supposedly, they are setting you up.”

“I don’t know who your sources are, but you’re wrong.”

“Hey, man, I’m not asking you on this. One of my COs heard Ignacio’s brother talking about it. He’s locked up in cell block C. Now what the fuck will they even talk about that shit for if it weren’t true?”

Jasper paced in disbelief as he rubbed his temple. Who could he trust?

“Is she an attorney?”

“I heard she is. But she doesn’t work for that law firm you started with. Word has it they visited your former lawyer and threatened him and his family if he didn’t step aside and play ball.”

Jasper’s heart beat rapidly. His veins throbbed. Things were starting to make sense now. It wasn’t really quite clear to him why Phil abandoned him. He suspected it might have been because of Heather, but that had not

made sense to him because Phil had known about the affair with Heather for years.

“How much did they offer her?”

“I heard \$1 million cool.”

“Anything else?”

“Hey, I just hope that helped.”

“Yes, it does, man. Thanks, and you know I will take care of you on this.” They shook hands.

Samantha was not a typical attorney; she was hired by Antonio Ignacio to learn where Jasper had hidden the \$600 million he allegedly embezzled from Ignacio Industries and the Dizilios family. Antonio Ignacio offered her \$1 million for information on the correct account location of the funds Jasper stole. But Jasper was offering a lifetime of wealth to Samantha, and she had strong feelings for Jasper and decided that she would benefit more favorably by helping him. She had dual motivation.

Jasper returned to his cell. His bail hearing was in the morning, and he needed to plan his strategy.

The following morning, Jasper entered a crowded courtroom.

“Case number 65789042. The United States against Jasper Anson Cunningham. Judge Michael Hartford presiding. Will the defendant please rise.”

Jasper and Samantha were together at the defendant’s table.

“Your Honor, given the ten months my client has spent in jail thus far, I would like to re-open a request for him to be granted bail.”

“On what grounds, Ms. Santiago?” Judge Hartford harshly remarked.

Prosecutor Charles Wynn jumped up and exclaimed, “Your Honor, this is the first I am hearing about this request. No motion papers have been filed.”

Jasper realized Samantha never took the necessary action to ensure a plea could be made. Judge Hartford responded, “Ms. Santiago, you should

have filed the necessary motions. Bail request denied.”

“Your Honor,” Jasper began, “I would like to speak.”

“Ms. Santiago, please advise your client accordingly.”

Samantha looked at Jasper and whispered, “Jasper, what are you doing? What’s on your mind?”

“Don’t you dare say another word out of your mouth on my behalf, lady!”

Addressing Judge Hartford, Jasper continued, “Your Honor, I would like to request that Samantha Santiago be removed from my case effective immediately.”

“Objection, Your Honor,” shouted Prosecutor Wynn. “Is this their strategy to delay the trial?”

“Ms. Santiago, what is this all about?” asked Judge Hartford.

“I don’t know, Your Honor.” Samantha looked at Jasper confused.

“Has your client advised you of his wishes?” asked Judge Hartford.

“No, he has not,” responded Samantha.

“Take a ten-minute recess and talk to your client.” Judge Hartford pounded his gavel.

The court officer escorted Samantha and Jasper to the adjacent case room. Samantha asked the court officer to leave them alone so they could confidentially discuss the case.

“Jasper, what in the hell is going on?”

“You bitch! Who the fuck are YOU to ask ME what is going on? You didn’t even file the fucking motion for bail! You had no intention of getting me out. Are you even a fucking lawyer? You bitch, I should kill you.”

Jasper raced up to Samantha, lunged at her neck, and choked her. Samantha was unable to breathe or scream. Jasper continued to choke Samantha while he shook her neck. Her face turned red. She tried to grab his hands, but she was too weak.

“You bitch! I trusted you with my life!” he exclaimed. Samantha was beet red, and he continued to strangle her with both hands shaking her neck. “You are nothing more than a dirty crook like all the others . . . nothing more than a paid whore!” He threw Samantha by the neck to the ground, freeing her of his choke hold. Samantha held her neck and coughed incessantly.

He walked up to her while she was on the ground coughing. He pulled her halfway up by the hair and pushed his pelvis in her face.

“What do you want? Dick? Money? More dick? More money? Are you fucking the highest bidder?”

Samantha caught her breath and remained silent. She concluded Jasper was aware of her connection to Antonio Ignacio.

“Do you know that I can put your lights out right fucking now?” He formed a fist and lifted his arm to punch Samantha in the jaw but refrained. He threw her back on the ground by her hair.

“Get the fuck off my case! Get the hell out my life! I never want to see you ever again, bitch! And the day that I do, I won’t hold back like I did today. I will kill you!”

Samantha rose. She reached for her leather portfolio with Jasper’s case files.

“You leave that fucking portfolio with my case documents right there. They don’t belong to you. Touch it, and I will break your fucking arm, you little whore.” Samantha started to walk off.

“Tell your boyfriend he’s wrong. I don’t have his money. Did you find any money? Did I ever say anything about his money? Don’t you think you would have learned that by now?”

“Jasper, I started off with that intent, but after we became close, I saw how—”

“Bitch, if you don’t get the fuck out of here right now, I will choke your ass to death.”

Samantha swung open the door, and the door banged against the wall.

Jasper re-entered the courtroom escorted by the court officer.

“Mr. Cunningham, where is your attorney?” asked Judge Hartford.

“Your Honor, I dismissed my attorney.”

“On what grounds?”

“She was conspiring against me. I would like to start proceedings to have her disbarred.”

“Hold tight here. One case at a time,” said Prosecutor Wynn.

“Mr. Cunningham, those are serious allegations,” remarked Judge Hartford.

“I have strong evidence, Your Honor.”

“Are you seeking new representation?”

“I respectfully ask the court for self-representation. Given the sensitivities around my case, I am concerned that I will not secure unbiased representation.”

“Mr. Cunningham, I am offended by your accusation that our legal system cannot produce attorneys who will represent you fairly,” Judge Hartford firmly stated.

“They may exist, Your Honor. However, I’m not in a position to seek unbiased representation.”

“Any objections by the district attorney’s office?”

Prosecutor Wynn knew Jasper lacked formal legal training and experience and anticipated a less challenging trial. “No objections, Your Honor.”

“Your Honor,” said Jasper, “I respectfully request an additional four weeks to prepare my case for trial.”

“Four weeks granted. Case adjourned.” Judge Hartford pounded his gavel. Jasper was escorted back to prison.

The Trial and Sentencing Part I

A month later, Jasper sat in his jail cell reading *Business and Money* magazine when a corrections officer walked over to tell him it was time to leave. The officer watched Jasper dress in a navy blue pin-striped suit, white shirt, and gold-and-navy tie. He escorted Jasper to the prisoner bus for a trip to the Manhattan courthouse. When the bus entered New York City, Jasper enviously watched New Yorkers scurrying to their destinations. It was a rainy gray day. Umbrellas were bumping in the crowds, and cars splashed puddles from the streets onto the sidewalks. They drove past a crowded coffee shop filled with pedestrians from the morning rush getting their cafe lattes. Dozens of people were entering the street from the subway underground carrying briefcases. Jasper sorely missed his freedom. It had been eleven months since the arrest.

The prison bus pulled up to the Supreme Court building and entered the parking garage underneath. There were twelve other inmates on the bus, and Jasper was the thirteenth to descend. He thought how lucky on this day, the beginning of his trial. Outside the courthouse was swarming with reporters covering his case. When Jasper entered the building, he saw more of the same. Jasper was amazed by the dozens of spectators. He felt the celebrity and planned to take advantage of the attention from the press. Unclear to Jasper, however, was Ramone Santos speaking with a reporter for a New York paper.

Jasper confidently entered the courtroom and looked around. He saw many familiar faces—Laura's family and business associates. The voices dropped as the onlookers observed Jasper enter. He was brought into the courtroom in handcuffs. The stares were burning through his clothes, but he maintained his dignity. The potential jurors had not yet entered the courtroom. The court officer gave Jasper the briefcase with his defense papers that had been taken away before he got on the bus. Jasper sat at the defense table appearing to be an attorney rather than a defendant.

Court Officer: May the court come to order. The Honorable Judge Michael Hartford presiding. The trial of the United States against Jasper Anson Cunningham will now begin.

After three days of jury selection, the prosecutor and Jasper finally agreed on twelve jurors and two alternates. The jurors were comprised of eight women and four men. It was racially diverse, primarily white-collar workers who were over forty. The jury foreman was the exception. He was about thirty-five, Chinese, and a corporate executive. Jasper liked this choice because he was smart, young, and ambitious, representing traits Jasper embodied early in his career. On the fourth day, the trial began.

Judge: Will the prosecution present opening remarks to the jury.

Prosecutor: Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Charles Wynn, and I represent the federal government in the prosecution of the defendant Jasper Anson Cunningham. This is the first of two opportunities I will have to talk to you directly about the charges against the defendant. Today I am going to explain to you the nature of the case.

The prosecution explained they had evidence Jasper embezzled millions of dollars from various clients through his consulting firm. They also planned to prove that Jasper conspired to murder his wife, Laura. When Prosecutor Wynn had completed his remarks, Jasper walked over to the jury pool and leaned on the banister facing them.

Jasper: Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, my name is Jasper Cunningham. I am representing myself during this trial. I am solely here to defend myself against these charges. I have done nothing wrong. The prosecution has the burden of proving its case. I am not guilty of these charges. You will conclude the same by the end of the trial.

Judge: Prosecution, call your first witness.

Prosecutor: I call to the stand Solae Ngane-Santos.

Solae walked through the courtroom with fashionable flair as though she were still on the catwalk doing a runway show in Milan. She wore a buff pink cashmere coat and matching wool dress beneath. The low-cut neck exposed her robust cleavage. Her fitted dress revealed her shapely body. She did not wear any hosiery. Her slim legs were firmly planted in her shiny black patent leather pumps. She held a 1960s retro rectangle patent leather pocketbook to match. Ramone sat in the middle of the courtroom for support.

Court Officer: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help you God?

Solae: I do.

Prosecutor: Can you state your full name for the court?

Solae: Solae Ngane-Santos.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Ms. Ngane-Santos.

Recognizing the jury wouldn't quite understand the reason Solae was dressed somewhat inappropriately for a court appearance, he adjusted his order of questioning.

Prosecutor: Ms. Ngane-Santos, what do you do for a living?

Solae: I am a former high-fashion model. I now promote fashion designers via fashion shows in Europe, Asia, and, of course, here in the U.S.

Prosecutor: How did you make the acquaintance of the defendant Jasper Cunningham?

Solae: I met Mr. Cunningham at an event my husband, Ramone, who at that time was my boyfriend, held in New York to celebrate influential men.

Prosecutor: Was the defendant attending as an honoree?

Solae: Not at all. He was a guest to celebrate the award recipients.

Prosecutor: And how did the defendant feel about not being honored?

Jasper: Objection, Your Honor. How would that tart know how I felt?

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor! Tart?

The court is in an uproar.

Judge: Quiet down. (*The judge banged his gavel.*) Sustained. Prosecutor, please rephrase your question.

Prosecutor: Please elaborate on the circumstances in which you made the defendant's acquaintance?

Solae: I knew Mr. Cunningham to be a wealthy businessman. I was actively seeking investors for my upcoming Ladies in Autumn fashion show and wanted to pitch my project to him. Mr. Cunningham was interested in making an investment.

Prosecutor: On that same evening, did FBI Agent Alexander Lawson approach you to discuss Jasper Cunningham?

Solae: Yes.

Prosecutor: Can you tell us about that conversation?

Solae: At the end of the affair, after everyone had left for the evening, Ramone called me aside to a table. There were federal agents with him. I wasn't sure what was going on. Ramone stood next to me while the agents explained. They said they had an ongoing undercover investigation of Mr. Cunningham and his firm for some time. They said Mr. Cunningham was at the helm of investment schemes and fraudulent transactions. They were unable to obtain anything of substance through telephone wiretaps and certainly not from undercover infiltration. The agents wanted to launch a simple investigative approach. That is where I came into the picture. I explained to the agents that Mr. Cunningham was interested in investing in my upcoming fashion event. They asked me to further pursue Mr. Cunningham's offer. They wanted me to visit his office and plant a receiver. I was given specific instructions on how to carry this out.

Prosecutor: Please tell us about your visit to the defendant's office.

Solae: About two weeks later, I arrived at Mr. Cunningham's office around 11:00 am unannounced just as Agent Lawson proposed that I do. Mr. Cunningham and I discussed his potential financial investment in my upcoming fashion launch. After reading the business plan and reviewing the projected return on investment, Mr. Cunningham offered to invest \$100,000 in my autumn show. Needless to say, I was very happy with his offer, which I gladly accepted. He remarked that I was a good businesswoman and that he could see my fashion expertise shine through. He was also confident in the potential success of the show.

Prosecutor: Ms. Ngane-Santos, how were you able to plant the receiver without the defendant knowing?

Solae: Jasper has a private bathroom in his office. I excused myself and went into the bathroom. I placed the bug on the bottom of the sink. I had no idea his cleaning lady would discover it a month later.

Prosecutor: But did the FBI inform you that your assistance was successful?

Solae: Yes. FBI Lawson told me that they were able to get on tape some incriminating conversations held in Jasper's office during that month.

Prosecutor: Ms. Ngane-Santos, this is way outside of your area of expertise. What inspired you to assist the FBI in this matter?

Solae: Well, really, it was my husband, Ramone. (*She smiled at Ramone.*) He takes great pride in recognizing positive role models and their significant contributions to society. He acknowledges people who deserve accolades for the work done to enhance our culture. On the flip side, we also take great issue with members of our society who tarnish our legacy, our image, and cripple our ability to positively move forth.

Prosecutor: So you saw this as your duty to serve your community? your people?

Jasper: Objection. Leading the witness.

Judge: Sustained.

Prosecutor: Please summarize your rationale for assisting the FBI, Ms. Ngane-Santos.

Solae: (*She was clearly about to say what she had heard Ramone profess many times before.*) Well, to help preserve the dignity and honor of those of us who are fostering change for the better.

Jasper laughed loudly.

Judge: Mr. Cunningham, one more outburst and I will hold you in contempt of court.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, the State would like to submit exhibits A through H, which are eight tapes of conversations that transpired in the office of Jasper Cunningham, evidencing the crimes he committed.

Judge: The court accepts exhibits A through H. Are there any further questions for this witness?

Prosecutor: No further questions.

Judge: Does the defense have any questions?

Jasper: Yes, I do. (*He approached the witness stand.*) Good morning, Ms. Ngane-Santos.

Solae: Good morning.

Jasper: It's good to see you from the front with your clothes on.

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor!

The court had scattered laughter and whispering. Ramone looked puzzled.

Judge: (Shouted) Approach the bench! (*Prosecutor Wynn and Jasper walked before Judge Hartford. He spoke to Jasper in a whisper.*) I was not completely convinced that you should be granted self-representation privileges. You had better not make a mockery of my courtroom. I won't tolerate it. Do you understand?

Jasper: Yes, Your Honor. (*They left the judge's bench.*)

Judge: Sustained! The jury is to disregard the last comment made by the defense.

Jasper: My apologies, Ms. Ngane-Santos. You testified that we met at your husband's honoree event. Is that correct?

Solae: That's correct.

Jasper: Thereafter, did I invite you to my offices to discuss your proposition?

Solae: Yes, you did.

Jasper: Did you present any spreadsheets with financial projections to me, Ms. Ngane-Santos?

Solae: Well . . . not exactly. We discussed what the profit would be.

Jasper: Did you just testify that I read the business plan and projected return on investment?

Solae: I meant to say we discussed those items.

Jasper: Really? I see. How much time did we “discuss” your financial plan?

Solae: I’m not quite sure. I don’t really remember.

Jasper: On the day you arrived at my office, were you flirting with me, Ms. Ngane-Santos?

Solae: Excuse me?

Jasper: OK, must have been a difficult question. *(He said sarcastically.)* Let me rephrase. Did you or did you not make sexual advances at me?

Solae: No, I did not.

Jasper: Ms. Ngane-Santos, I remind you that you are under oath. I’ll ask you more directly, did we have sex in my office the day I handed you the check for \$100,000?

Solae: *(Solae looked at Ramone. Her eyes welled with tears. She never told Ramone about the sexual encounter at Jasper’s office that day. She hoped the episode would be buried forever.)* You assaulted me, Jasper. *(She honestly admitted.)*

Jasper: I move to strike that unfounded accusation from the record.

Judge: I will allow it. Perhaps you should continue in order to get to the root of her comments.

Jasper: Ms. Ngane-Santos, let’s take it step-by-step. After you arrived, did we willingly touch each other sexually?

Solae: At first . . .

Jasper: Did you reject my advances?

Solae: Not at first . . .

Jasper: Why didn’t you?

Solae: I'm not sure.

Jasper: You're not sure?

Solae: I suppose that . . . I guess . . . because I had a slight degree of attraction to you. (*Ramone is angered. He folded his arms across his chest.*)

Jasper: (*Jasper smiled.*) Why thank you. (*He said with false appreciation.*) Did you willingly kiss me?

Solae: Well, not quite . . .

Jasper: Can you elaborate, Ms. Ngane?

Solae: You approached me. You kissed me.

Jasper: Did you kiss me back?

Solae: Well, yes, I suppose.

Jasper: Ms. Ngane, did you willingly provide sex?

Solae: NO, it wasn't like that—(*Ramone is now infuriated.*)

Jasper: Then, please, tell me what was it LIKE then?

There were chuckles in the courtroom.

Solae: I didn't intend to have . . . to allow things to go that far. They just escalated . . .

Jasper: Because you were attracted to me.

Solae: I guess.

Jasper: What indications made you believe that I assaulted you?

Solae: You were forceful and brutal. You went beyond the boundaries. You had your way with me.

Jasper: Why didn't you stop me or scream? My assistant was right outside my office.

Solae: I wanted to fulfill what Ramone and I were committed to doing.

Jasper: Oh yes, I recall . . . To right every wrong. (*He poked fun.*) For truth, justice, and the American way. Who are you two? Batman and

Batgirl?

The members of the courtroom chuckled.

Judge: You have been warned, Cunningham!

Jasper: If I may sum up, Ms. Ngane, when you left with my hundred-thousand-dollar check in your hand, after we had sex, which you are now calling an assault, which you never screamed or resisted, which you never reported to the authorities, did you immediately cash my check?

Solae: Yes.

Jasper: Before you left my offices, did you not agree that you would see me again?

Solae: As a cautious measure.

Jasper: Let's get to the underlying reason, Ms. Ngane. Contrary to your statement earlier, did you not come to my offices to solicit money knowing you would offer yourself to me in a way that a man with my means could not refuse from a woman like you?

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor. Relevance? Judge, what does any of this have to do with the fact that Solae set up the transmitter capturing conversations of the defendant planning embezzlements of client money and fraudulent audit reports?

Judge: I was waiting for you to object. What took you so long? Cunningham, what is the point of this line of questioning?

Jasper: I plan to prove, Your Honor, that Ms. Ngane told me about a scheme that she and Ramone were pulling off in order to extort money from me.

Prosecutor: Extortion?

Jasper: I don't go around every day handing over \$100,000 for a nondescript business venture to someone whose only knowledge of assets is her body.

Judge: Overruled. Go on, but don't stray.

Jasper: Ms. Ngane, isn't it true that when you arrived, you told me that you had pertinent information that could jeopardize my freedom and business affairs?

Solae: No, that is a lie.

Jasper: Isn't it true that you said you would continue to provide details of the FBI investigation to me if I financed your current and future business projects in a significant way?

Solae: No, that is not true.

Jasper: Didn't we agree that you would plant the transmitter to throw off the FBI about our deal?

Solae: No, that is totally a lie! (*Ramone shook his head in disbelief unsure of the truthfulness of Solae's testimony.*)

Jasper: Ms. Ngane, remember you are under oath. Didn't we agree to all of the above, and we sealed it with passionate sex in my office? And that is why you neatly refrained from mentioning our sexual tryst in your testimony to the DA and this entire court earlier today?

Solae: You bastard! How could you make up such a story? I didn't agree to do any such thing with you. You used me.

Jasper: Ms. Ngane, you testified that you cashed my hundred-thousand-dollar check. What could I have USED you for?

Solae: My body.

Jasper: Your body? Ms. Ngane, you have a lovely body, but I can assure this court that I do not need to pay \$100,000 for sex with an EX-model or any woman for that matter. (*The members of the courtroom chuckled.*) No further questions.

Solae was embarrassed and in disbelief. Her hellish experience in Jasper's office came back to haunt her. She naïvely thought Jasper would never raise those events for fear that he would be charged with assault. But instead, Solae was portrayed as a liar and a whore.

Judge: Prosecutor, cross?

Prosecutor: (*In a defeated tone.*) No, Your Honor.

Judge: Please call your next witness to the stand.

Prosecutor: The State calls FBI Agent Alexander Lawson to the stand.

After being sworn in, Agent Lawson spoke of thirty-three days in which the powerful transmitter in Jasper's office recorded eight conversations that implicated Jasper. These conversations included the dates, times, and companies that Jasper and his partners planned illegal money laundering and forging books and records to hide funds that were moved from four pharmaceutical company accounts to his own. The tapes also addressed certifying to the accuracy of the financial statements of two beverage companies, both of which were in financial trouble, in order to increase the market perception of the company for greater stock investment. After nearly an hour of testifying, and listening to the tapes, Agent Lawson's evidence against Jasper was overwhelming.

Prosecutor: Agent Lawson, let me wrap up my questioning by asking whether or not, in your expert opinion, the defendant fabricated the conversations on these tapes in order to intentionally mislead the FBI.

Agent Lawson: I have over twenty years of experience in law enforcement, almost all of which I spent doing undercover investigative work. It is in my expert view that the individuals recorded on these tapes did not have any knowledge that they were being taped.

Prosecutor: Thank you Agent Lawson. No further questions.

Judge: (*Addressing Jasper.*) Do you have any questions for FBI Agent Lawson?

Jasper: Yes, Your Honor. (*Jasper approached the witness chair.*) Good afternoon, Agent Lawson.

Agent Lawson: Cunningham.

Jasper: It's good to see you're not trying to shake me down for money today. Any mob palms to grease today?

Judge: Chambers! (*The members of the courtroom jumped on their feet, and noise erupted. Reporters began calling their offices.*)

Prosecutor Wynn and Jasper went to Judge Hartford's chambers.

"You, Jasper Cunningham, are in contempt of court!"

"My apologies, Your Honor," said Jasper.

"Bullshit!" exclaimed Judge Hartford. "I warned you over and over again during this trial, but you refuse to refrain from injecting judgmental, unproven accusations. The court is far from pleased with your plan to influence the jury by spouting unfounded remarks."

"My apologies, Your Honor. It will not happen again." said Jasper.

"You're damn right it won't happen again. Your apologies are meaningless. This court will cease session today while I have my court officer book your pathetic self on contempt. You WILL respect my courtroom!"

Prosecutor Wynn began, "Thank you, Your Honor. I request a motion to have legal aid assigned as Jasper Cunningham's defense to stop the nonsense in your court."

"Motion denied. Although I personally agree that this is nonsense, he has the right to defend himself amongst a jury of his peers." Judge Hartford pressed his telephone intercom button. "Allison, send Officer Brown into my chambers."

Almost immediately, Officer Brown arrived accompanied by another officer.

Pointing his chin at Jasper, Judge Hartford firmly stated, "Book him on contempt of court." They handcuffed Jasper and led him to the holding bin. Judge Hartford and Prosecutor Wynn were alone in Hartford's chambers.

"Listen, Charles. Although Cunningham is pulling some outlandish games in there, he's getting his point across. He's good. In spite of Agent Lawson's strong evidence and testimony today, I think the jury likes Cunningham, and you better use this time to figure out how to strengthen your presently weak case."

Two days later, the trial reconvened. Jasper looked worn and tired from being booked over the past forty-eight hours on the contempt of court

charges. Agent Lawson took the stand, and Jasper resumed questioning him.

Jasper: On the day of the arrest, did you, Agent Lawson, offer to destroy evidence against me in return for sums of money?

Lawson: I am offended by that question.

Judge: Answer the question, sir.

Lawson: Absolutely not.

Jasper: On the day of the arrest of my partners and I, did you or did you not bring hit men . . . thugs with you to my offices to intimidate and assault us?

Lawson: I was only accompanied by FBI agents.

Jasper: Agent Lawson, re-think your answer to that question. I have witnesses who will testify there were men who raided my office, brutalized my now dead partners, terrified my staff, and assaulted me.

Lawson: (*He firmly responded.*) There were no such men accompanying us on the day in question.

Jasper: Do you have dealings with the known Colombian drug trafficker Antonio Ignacio?

Lawson: (*Surprised by the question, Agent Lawson licked his lips.*) I'm with the FBI. Why would I have business dealings with him?

Judge: Answer the question, Agent.

Lawson: Of course not.

Jasper: Do you have any connections to the murder of my partners who each took a bullet to the head while in prison?

Lawson: You son of a—

Judge: Agent Lawson . . .

Lawson: Absolutely not.

Jasper: Isn't it true that my life was only spared because you needed to learn the whereabouts of substantial amounts of underworld money you thought I possessed?

Lawson: You would have been better off with the same fate. You're going to rot in jail anyway.

Jasper: I move to strike. (*Prosecutor Wynn was disgusted by the testimony.*)

Judge: The jury will disregard Agent Lawson's last comment. Agent Lawson, please answer the question.

Lawson: I don't know what you're talking about.

Jasper: No further questions.

Agent Lawson left the stand concerned whether or not Jasper would produce evidence to substantiate that he brought mobsters to Jasper's office for the arrest and, most importantly, establish Lawson's link to the underworld.

Judge: Any re-examination, Counselor?

Prosecutor: Yes, Your Honor, but I request an adjournment for today. I would like to resume first thing tomorrow morning.

Judge: Counselor, we just started today!

Prosecutor: Your Honor, new accusations were raised today by the defense, and I would like to be in a position to rebut.

Judge: (*Judge Hartford shook his head and announced to the court.*) We are adjourned for today. We will resume at 9:30 am tomorrow. (*He banged his gavel.*)

Outside of the courtroom, Prosecutor Wynn approached Agent Lawson visibly disgusted.

"I'll see you in my office in ten minutes," said Wynn, and he walked off.

Fifteen minutes later, Agent Lawson and Prosecutor Wynn were alone in Wynn's office in a heated shouting match with each other.

“You bribed him for you to destroy evidence? Why didn’t you tell me? You brought hit men on the day of the arrest? What the hell were you thinking?” shouted Wynn.

“Look . . . I was trying to get a confession out of him. There was no reason to believe he would raise connections with the Ignacios. This guy is a loose cannon looking to get killed,” explained Lawson.

“What the hell are you saying in front of me? Get the fuck out of my office and the fuck off my case! The next time you want to bury one of my cases, please do so after I get a conviction.”

Agent Lawson left Wynn’s office and rode the elevator down to the parking garage in the lower level. When Agent Lawson got off the elevator, there were two men who startled him as they approached, but Agent Lawson became comfortable when he recognized them as the men who accompanied him to Jasper’s office on the day of the arrest.

“Are you guys crazy? Showing up at the courthouse,” said Agent Lawson. He continued to walk to his car as he spoke. The men followed him close behind.

He continued, “I can’t have anyone see me speak to you two. The DA is already pissed off with me on this shit. Get the fuck away from me.” They continued to walk behind him. When they arrived at his car, Agent Lawson turned around and looked at both men.

“What the fuck is the problem? Didn’t I make myself clear? Get the hell outta here!”

One of the men pushed Agent Lawson up against the driver’s side of the door with extreme force. He punched Lawson with brass knuckles instantly breaking his jaw. The second man pulled out a switchblade. He stabbed Lawson in the neck and twisted the knife 180 degrees, digging into Lawson’s main artery.

“Antonio Ignacio said to tell you that you are no longer of any need to him and that you failed.” Agent Lawson fell to the ground bleeding to death as the men walked away.

The following morning, the front pages of the newspapers headlined “FBI Agent on the Take Killed.” The story stated Lawson had mob-related ties for years, and the murder resulted from his testimony in the Cunningham case. The article did not implicate Jasper. In fact, the papers viewed Jasper favorably for forcing the corruption to surface. Jasper was pleased with achieving better than his desired outcome. Before the trial reconvened, Ramone was in the hallway, yet another day, once again speaking with news reporters.

“This case is deeper than the embezzlement of money by Jasper Cunningham. The murder of FBI Agent Lawson speaks to Jasper Cunningham’s connections to underworld ties. He should be investigated and charged as an accomplice in the murder,” remarked Ramone to the press.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, I call Tracey Bodden to the stand.

Tracey walked into the courtroom solemnly. It had been four months since her brutal rape and beating. It appeared she had healed on the exterior; however, she had not recovered emotionally. She was obtaining psychological treatment to work through the assault and Jasper’s deceit.

Court Officer: Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Tracey: I do.

Prosecutor: Good morning, Ms. Bodden.

Tracey: Good morning.

Prosecutor: Can you describe for the court your relationship with the defendant?

Tracey: I was the investment banker on several of the clients that Cunningham, Gates & Waddell provided accounting and consulting services.

Prosecutor: Any personal relationship with the defendant?

Tracey: Yes. We had an affair.

Prosecutor: When and for how long?

Tracey: Our affair ended this year. So . . . for about 2 ½ years.

Prosecutor: Were you aware that the defendant was married?

Tracey: Yes . . . yes, I was.

Prosecutor: Did the defendant ever speak to you about plans to leave his wife?

Tracey: No.

Prosecutor: Then why did you stay with the defendant, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: Today, I don't know.

Prosecutor: At the time, Ms. Bodden, what made you maintain a relationship with the defendant? Did the defendant promise to marry you?

Jasper: Objection, Your Honor. Leading the witness.

Judge: Sustained.

Prosecutor: I'll rephrase the question. Why did you stay in an extramarital affair with the defendant for over two years?

Tracey: He said he loved me. He said he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. (*Tracey's tone was factual.*)

Prosecutor: Did you want the same, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: Yes.

Prosecutor: Did you love the defendant?

Tracey: At one time, yes. Very much so. (*Tracey did not display any emotion.*)

Prosecutor: Did the defendant ever discuss with you how, as a married man, he would be able to spend the rest of his life with you?

Tracey: Yes, he did.

Prosecutor: And how did the defendant say he would have accomplished that?

Tracey: He requested . . . he asked me to help him get rid of Laura. (*Tracey's voice trembled.*)

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, can you clarify that please?

Tracey: Jasper was convincing. He made it seem like it was the right thing to do. (*Tracey began to cry.*) Jasper asked me to help him kill Laura.

There was a hush across the courtroom.

Prosecutor: Are you all right, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: Yes.

Prosecutor: Do you need a Kleenex?

Tracey: No, I'm fine.

Prosecutor: Can you tell the court, Ms. Bodden . . . when did the defendant approach you with this idea?

Tracey: Laura was about six months pregnant, so just over a year ago.

Prosecutor: Can you describe the details of the conversation?

Tracey: Jasper and I met every other Thursday. It was our time together. We generally had dinner at Corabels or Blue Stones. We intentionally stayed low key. We were always discreet in public. That particular night, we ate at Blue Stones and had quite a bit of merlot. We left the restaurant and headed to his private suite at the Regency Palace Hotel. We arrived there about 8:30 pm. Although Jasper and I would converse during dinner, we rarely would spend time talking once we arrived at the suite. We only had two nights a month to be intimate, and we would make use of every minute. But on this night, he wanted to talk. First he shared how much he loved me and that it hurt him every day that we were not together. He said his entire life would be meaningless without me. We kissed, and I thought we were now going to make love. Instead, Jasper said I was his queen and that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with me. He then reached into his breast pocket and presented a ring box. He opened the box, and inside was a three-carat diamond-and-sapphire engagement ring. (*Tracey cried out loud.*)

Prosecutor: (*He handed Tracey a box of tissues.*) Ms. Bodden, do you need a glass of water?

Tracey: No, thank you. (*She sniffed and continued.*) So I told Jasper he had lost his mind. Polygamy is a crime. Jasper said he wasn't talking about

polygamy. He wanted me to be his wife. His only wife. He wanted me, not Laura, to raise his son. He wanted me to kill Laura.

Prosecutor: How did Jasper propose that you kill the deceased Laura Brockton Cunningham?

Tracey: Well, he said he wanted me to suffocate her in the hospital after she gave birth to the baby.

Laura's mother was sitting in the courtroom emotionally distraught from Tracey's testimony. She screamed out, "Murderer. You whore! You murdered my daughter!"

The judge banged his gavel and shouted, "Please quiet down." But Laura's mother was frantic and uncontrollable. She stood up.

"Quiet down? This woman plotted to kill my daughter. Laura would not have gotten hit by that car if she hadn't heard you plotting to kill her! Dear god! Why isn't SHE arrested? Why isn't she also on trial?"

Judge Hartford continued pounding his gavel and shouted, "Mrs. Brockton, I do not want to remove you from this courtroom. But if I have to, I shall."

She sat down and fell into the arms of her husband.

Prosecutor: (*Re-addressing Tracey.*) Can you elaborate on the defendant's plot to murder his wife?

Tracey: Jasper asked that I visit Laura the day after she gave birth and when everyone was assured that the baby was healthy and not in need of Laura for some immediate medical reason. Jasper told me to behave as though I was a friend of the Cunningham family who Laura had never met. Jasper had placed crushed pills in her bag to slip into her beverage to make her less lucid. When she became incoherent, he told me to place a pillow over her nose and suffocate her.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, (*He asked gently.*) did you ever ask yourself why Jasper did not plan to kill his wife himself?

Tracey: Not at that time. No.

Prosecutor: Did you follow through with the plan?

Tracey: No.

Prosecutor: Had Laura Brockton not died from a car accident, do you think you would have carried out the defendant's request?

Jasper: Objection, Your Honor. Hypothetical intent.

Judge: Sustained.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, why did you continue to have relations with the defendant?

Tracey: At the time, I thought we loved each other. I thought we had a future . . . a lifetime together. I wasn't thinking clearly.

Prosecutor: Did he ever tell you that he was in love with you?

Tracey: Almost every time I saw him.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, I'd like to switch our discussion to the night when you were brutally assaulted at your home.

Tracey: Yes.

Prosecutor: Can you describe for the court the events leading up to the assault?

Tracey: I worked late that night at my office largely because I spent hours pondering over information in a file that I had recently discovered that I accidentally lifted from Jasper's desk.

Prosecutor: What was in the file, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: The file contained information on a bank account in Jasper's name.

Prosecutor: How much money was in the account?

Tracey: The statement showed over \$600 million.

There was a slight uproar in the courtroom that quickly ceased.

Prosecutor: Can you repeat the amount for the court, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: Six hundred million three hundred thousand dollars to be exact.

Prosecutor: Please continue.

Tracey: It was very late, and I was tired. I caught a taxi and arrived home about 11:00 pm. I opened a bottle of wine to relax, drew a bath, and while the water was running, I started to prepare a light dinner. I returned to the bathroom, undressed, and entered the tub when the apartment doorbell rang. Since it was the bell upstairs, I assumed it was my neighbor on the floor . . . Ellen.

Prosecutor: Why would you conclude it was Ellen, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: We have a doorman downstairs, and he announces our visitors via the intercom. Not to mention, I have very few visitors from within my building.

Prosecutor: Continue, please.

Tracey: So I put my robe on and walked over to the door. I intended to let Ellen know we would not be able to visit tonight. However, as I approached the foyer, two men were already walking into the apartment.

Prosecutor: Did you know either of these men?

Tracey: Oh no. And they weren't men. I should say savages! (*Tracey slowly transformed to an uneasy emotional state throughout the remainder of her testimony.*) I attempted to run to the phone to call 911, but one of them grabbed me. He tied me to my kitchen chair. They ransacked my apartment. I was brutally beaten and raped until I was unconscious.

Prosecutor: Did the intruders ever say why they were there?

Tracey: They asked me for the location of the money Jasper stole from their uncle.

Prosecutor: Who did they say was their uncle?

Tracey: One of them said his uncle was Antonio Ignacio.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, I am sorry for what happened to you. As difficult as it will be, we need for you to recount very specifically the events that evening.

Jasper: Objection, Your Honor. Relevance? The alleged assault does not have any direct bearing on my charges. Also, these men were not convicted nor even arrested for the alleged assault she described. Therefore, no proof that a rape or assault had even occurred.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, the rape and assault help to explain Tracey's state of mind during the events leading to the disclosure of the bank account information, which the defendant is charged with embezzling.

Judge: Did the defendant report these events to the police?

Prosecutor: Yes, Your Honor.

Judge: Overruled. I'll allow testimony of the details of the alleged rape and assault.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden.

Tracey: One of them was more concerned with locating the bank account information. He threw down a couple of my bookcases and broke several picture frames. He searched my computer drives, and of course, he found nothing. While he was in another room I use as an office, which is separate from where I was tied up, the other animal fondled himself in front of me. As a result of the wrestling and struggling earlier, my robe was partially open, and he was like a wolf dog, groping himself and timing his physical attack on me. (*Tracey cried.*) My hands were tied. I continued to attempt to break loose, but it was impossible. My mouth was taped. I couldn't scream. He threw me onto my living room floor and brutally raped me. By that time, he had punched me in the face many, many times. My lips and nose were bleeding. He raped me over and over again. In between, he beat me again and again. He eventually broke my nose. I later learned that I had to have six stitches to repair my lip, eight stitches in my vaginal area, and fourteen stitches to repair my anal area and rectal wall.

Jasper looked at Tracey without emotion.

Prosecutor: I'm very sorry, Ms. Bodden. (*He poured a glass of water for Tracey. She tried to regain her composure.*)

Tracey: I was unconscious for a while, so I'm not sure what happened during that time. They awakened me . . . I believe they splashed water on my face and continued their demands. At that point, I told them where they could find the information. The file was in my briefcase in the foyer.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, did you see these intruders again?

Tracey: No.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Ms. Bodden. No further questions.

Judge: Any questions from the defense?

Jasper: Yes, Your Honor. (*Jasper approached Tracey in a stern manner.*) Do you know how these men got into your apartment building?

Tracey: No, it is still a mystery to me. (*She innocently replied.*)

Jasper: You did mention you have a doorman, correct?

Tracey: Yes, yes, I do.

Jasper: Did the police find any evidence of a break-in? picked lock? busted door?

Tracey: Surprisingly, no.

Jasper: Just for the record, what floor are you on?

Tracey: I'm on the twenty-sixth floor.

Jasper: Are there any fire escapes in your building?

Tracey: No, there are not.

Jasper: (*He walked over to the jurors and looked at each one of them as he asked Tracey the questions.*) To be clear, Ms. Bodden, didn't the police report indicate there weren't any signs of forced entry and that it was possible you knew these men and allowed them inside of your apartment?

Tracey: They wrote something along those lines in their police report, but that was speculation.

Jasper: (*He turned around and loudly shouted.*) Your Honor, I submit a copy of the police report which states and I quote, “We conclude that there was no evidence of a break-in suggesting the defendant’s door was voluntarily opened.” (*Jasper faced the jury.*) So, Ms. Bodden, to summarize, there was no evidence of a break-in or forced entry, and you live in a skyscraper without any means of scaling walls?

Tracey: Jasper that is an idiotic remark.

Judge: Ms. Bodden, please refrain from addressing the defense beyond the realm of the question. And, Cunningham, watch the cynicism.

Jasper: How long have you known the two men who you invited into your apartment?

Tracey: (*Confused.*) Excuse me?

Prosecutor: Objection. I already established the witness did not know the men.

Judge: Sustained.

Jasper: Were you conspiring with these two men on the alleged money in question?

Tracey: Of course not. Jasper, what are you asking?

Jasper: As an investment banker, are you aware of ways to transfer money from one client account to another?

Tracey: That’s a common request as we execute transactions in the market.

Jasper: Are you aware of ways to transfer funds to Swiss accounts?

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor. We never specifically mentioned Swiss accounts. How did the defendant know about that?

Judge: Overruled.

Jasper: Are you aware of ways to transfer funds to Swiss accounts?

Tracey: Of course. The country is irrelevant. The funds transfer process is largely the same.

Jasper: (*Jasper started to aggressively question Tracey with badgering speed.*) Tracey, did you invite these men to your apartment for the typical orgies that you and I engaged in for years?

Tracey: What? Jasper, are you turning this—

Jasper: Please answer the question.

Tracey: No. You've never even been to my apartment!

Jasper: Tracey, were you conspiring with these men to launder money, and the situation had gone awry that night?

Tracey: No. Absolutely not!

Jasper: If you weren't, why didn't you tell the alleged intruders where the bank account information was located as soon as they asked?

Tracey: I don't know.

Jasper: You don't know? These men allegedly terrorized you, raped you, battered you, yet you still chose not to hand over a simple folder with information that supposedly didn't belong to you?

Tracey: (*Stuttering.*) I can't explain . . . You are twisting it . . . I was protecting you . . .

Jasper: No, Ms. Bodden, I CAN explain. You invited two of your conspiring associates to your apartment on the night in question. By your own testimony, they did NOT forcefully enter your dwelling. By your own testimony, you bathed and had a drink before they arrived and came to the door with only a loosely tied robe . . . likely in preparation of having sex with these men, which you customarily did with me. I know how much money you charged me. How much were THEY paying you for a twosome?

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor.

Judge: Sustained.

Jasper: (*He ignored the judge.*) Were you particularly lonesome and horny because I was imprisoned, and you needed TWO men to compensate in my absence?

Prosecutor: OBJECTION!

Judge: Sustained. Last time, Cunningham!

Jasper: Were you having dinner and drinking wine with your guests, and the orgy got heated?

Tracey: No, it didn't happen that way.

Jasper: Did these men become more aggressive than you anticipated?

Tracey: No, it didn't happen that way.

Jasper: Come clean, Ms. Bodden. Those men weren't there for any bank account information. Am I correct, Ms. Bodden?

Tracey: (*Now crying.*) That . . . is a lie! Jasper, how could you—

Jasper: (*Now shouting.*) I'll ask you, Ms. Bodden, did you embezzle client monies and, as my investment banker, attempt to frame me and my dead partners for these transactions?

Tracey: (*Tracey was bewildered. She was now crying uncontrollably.*) You filthy liar! I can't believe you are making it appear as though I have done this! Those men raped me, and you knew they would. You didn't care! You never loved me! You were using me all along!

Judge: Please calm down, Ms. Bodden, before I have to remove you from the stand.

Jasper: By your own testimony, you allowed the events in your apartment to continue, and eventually you gave the men the information they were supposedly looking for?

Tracey: It was rape! I was brutally beaten!

Jasper: Why didn't you give them the information before the beating, or after the first slap, or first punch, or the second punch? Or how about maybe after the first rape, second rape—

Prosecutor: (*Sounding somewhat defeated.*) Objection, Your Honor.

Judge: Overruled. However, Cunningham, allow her to answer. Propose one question at a time.

Jasper: Ms. Bodden, simple question, if you claim you didn't have a vested interest in the money, why didn't you submit to the request of these men immediately?

Tracey: I was thinking about us . . . our future. (*Jasper looked at her as though she had lied.*) I'm not sure.

Jasper: (*He corrected her.*) Yes . . . you are sure. You were protecting your own financial interest. Those bank accounts were yours, Ms. Investment Banker!

Tracey: They were not, and you know it.

Jasper: Ms. Bodden, did you, by your own testimony, plan to murder my wife?

Tracey: It was your idea. I foolishly loved you. You said we would be together—

Judge: Ms. Bodden, please do not direct your comments to the defendant. I know it's difficult, however, limit yourself to answering the question posed.

Jasper: I'll ask you again. Did you, by your own testimony, plan to murder my wife?

Tracey: Yes.

Jasper: No further questions.

Laura's mother, who was sitting in the middle of the courtroom for Tracey's entire testimony, stood up and shouted, "You got everything you deserve for being with a monster like him. You're a thief and a whore. At least you knew the type of animal you were dealing with. A liar, cheater, and murderer. Laura had no idea what type of man she was in the midst of. At least you're alive. You plotted to murder my daughter. She never stood a chance. She never stood a chance . . .," she sobbed. The courtroom erupted with shouts. Someone in the courtroom yelled out a profane name.

"Tracey, you bitch!"

The judge pounded his gavel and shouted, "Order, order. Court Officer, please remove Ms. Brockton." Jasper returned to his chair quite pleased

with the courtroom unrest and disdain for Tracey that her testimony generated.

Judge: Any re-examination by the prosecution?

Prosecutor: Yes. (*He approached Tracey very closely.*) Tracey Bodden, did you steal, embezzle from, or defraud any clients including the law offices of Cunningham, Gates & Waddell at any time?

Tracey: No, I did not!

Prosecutor: Were you savagely raped in your apartment by two men who you did not know on the night in question?

Tracey: (*She cried again.*) Yes, I was.

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, did you ever tell the defendant that the accounts were Swiss bank accounts?

Tracey: No, I did not.

Prosecutor: If the defendant hadn't known about the file you lifted from his desk, do you know how the defendant would have known the accounts in question were held in Swiss accounts?

Tracey: Because he put the money there!

Prosecutor: Ms. Bodden, has the defendant ever been to your apartment?

Tracey: No, he has not.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Ms. Bodden. No further questions.

Judge: Does the prosecution have any additional witnesses?

Prosecutor: Yes, Your Honor.

Judge: We will adjourn for lunch and resume at 2:00 pm.

During the lunch break, Tracey approached Laura's mother.

"May I speak with you, Ms. Brockton?" asked Tracey.

"I have entirely nothing to say to you, young lady."

"Please, let me explain."

“I sized you up at Laura’s wake. Your testimony was all the explaining I needed to hear from you.”

“I just wanted to clarify that the situation . . . the circumstances . . . were far more complex than it appears.”

Laura’s father overheard, approached the two women, and intervened.

“Ms. Bodden, you have directly and indirectly caused distress and grief to my family. It doesn’t matter to the outcome of this trial how ‘complex’ things were during your affair with Jasper. I was a lawyer and a judge for nearly thirty years combined. I’m familiar with the farce I saw up there today, but a jury likely will not. Do you know what ‘clean hands’ are, Ms. Bodden? The jury does not view you as having clean hands. You plotted to murder my daughter, and whether or not you performed the deed is a distant secondary issue in the juror’s minds. However, in my opinion, Jasper’s influence was far too great even for a well-educated professional woman like you. Personally, I don’t know whether or not you would have committed such a dreadful deed. But my opinion is irrelevant to the outcome of this case. There are two things that are as plain as day. My daughter is dead, and Jasper Cunningham may not get held accountable. My advice to you, Ms. Bodden, as you walk away from this case and, hopefully, Jasper Cunningham, choose your relationships more wisely in the future. Men like him are not as rare as you would hope.” Mark Brockton put his arm around his grieving wife, and they walked down the court corridor.

Tracey was speechless and frozen for a minute. She slowly walked over to the bench in the court hall and sat down. She contemplated how influential and persuasive Jasper had been with her. She thought about her first marriage and the humiliation and hurt those circumstances had caused. She reflected on the irreparable emotional damage her ex-husband inflicted on her coupled with resulting in her inability to have children. A man whose bisexuality was unveiled in a heart-wrenching observation. All of her life, she had been smitten by intellectual, handsome, powerful men who offered hope. She now realized that all of her relationships with men only offered false expectations engulfed in lies and deceit.

Although Mark Brockton was long gone, Tracey finally uttered, “Thank you, Judge Brockton.”

Tracey stood up, and as she walked down the corridor, she noticed a face she had seen before. *It couldn't be*, she thought. *What timing . . . what an uncanny occurrence!* she thought. She could not forget his face. It was her ex-husband's lover Craig. Tracey had only seen him briefly on the day she arrived home in her apartment in North Carolina interrupting her husband's lovemaking session a few years ago. He was walking with two men, all of whom appeared to be attorneys.

The timing of running into Craig was fate, she thought. Tracey wondered whether Craig might still be in a relationship with Matheson and could lead her to him. She wanted to speak with Matheson. After the events of today, she wanted to gain the closure that never happened. Tracey increased her pace and slipped into the same elevator car that Craig had entered as the door closed. The men on the elevator spoke about a case they had acquitted earlier that day. As the elevator doors opened, Tracey exited first but slowed her pace to allow Craig to walk past her. She followed Craig as he left the building. He said good-byes to his colleagues and walked toward the subway station. Tracey was unclear what she would gain by seeing Matheson, but she continued to follow Craig.

Tracey followed Craig onto the IRT train to Chambers Street. He got off and caught the local train to Christopher Street in Greenwich Village. He exited the subway and walked down to Bank Street with Tracey a short distance behind. Craig approached a three-story brownstone townhouse and placed a key in the door and went inside. Tracey was determined to see whether Matheson would enter the building. She sat at a coffee shop across the street with a view of the building. After drinking two cafe lattes, Tracey started to come to her senses.

How do I even know whether this man is even still in a relationship with Matheson? I must be crazy, she said to herself. She grabbed her purse and exited the coffee shop and attempted to hail a taxicab. She saw a cab stop in front of Craig's building to let off a passenger and a child. She ran to catch the cab, and as she approached, she saw it was Matheson with a young girl about seven years old. Tracey immediately changed her mind. She didn't

want to see Matheson anymore. Why was she even there, she thought. She had moved on with her life, and obviously, he had done the same. Hoping he had not seen her, she quickly turned around and started to walk the other way toward Hudson Street, but it was too late.

“Tracey?” Matheson called out. She turned around and looked at Matheson. This was indeed the man she once loved, she thought. He was even more handsome than she had remembered. The young girl ran up the front stairs of the townhouse and waited.

“My god, Tracey, is that really you?”

“Matheson, my goodness. What a surprise.”

“What are you doing here? in New York? on my street of all places?”

“I live in New York. Uptown,” she nervously replied.

“You are in New York? How long?”

“Well, ever since we split up. How about you?”

“Same here. My goodness. I guess great minds think alike.” They smiled somewhat uncomfortably. There was a long pause.

“It’s good to see you, Tracey.”

“It’s good to see you too, Matheson.”

The young girl was crossing her legs on the porch steps and shouted, “Daddy, I have to go to the bathroom.”

“Ring the bell. Daddy Craig is upstairs.”

Tracey’s eyes opened wide. “Daddy?” she asked.

“Yes, would you believe it? Craig and I adopted Lisa a year ago.” He looked at Lisa lovingly. “She is everything to us.”

Tracey was in shock. “I’m happy for you.”

The front door opened, and Craig stepped out in a gray jogging suit and slippers. Lisa ran past Craig into the building. Craig briefly watched Matheson speaking with the woman he could not recognize from afar. He closed the door and returned upstairs.

“So what are you doing in the village?” Matheson asked Tracey.

“I was visiting a friend up the street,” she lied.

“Really . . . small world. Which house? I may know him or her.”

Evasively, she replied, “Oh . . . around the corner. I’m just walking to the subway. I changed my mind when I saw the taxicab.” Attempting to change the subject, she said, “It’s such a quiet block and a nice crisp day.”

“Yes, it is.” There was another long pause. They silently stared at each other. Tracey was emotionally drained from the full day of testifying, and apparently, it showed on her face. Matheson, on the other hand, looked as if he had just done a photo shoot for the sexiest male magazine.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, I had a terribly exhausting day today.”

“Would you like to relax and get a drink? There’s a quiet bar two blocks away.”

“No . . . I should just get home and rest.”

Matheson was persistent. “For a quick one?”

Tracey was glad he seemed interested in spending time with her. “Sure. That would be nice.”

“Let me just bring my briefcase and Lisa’s book bag upstairs. Would you like to come up?”

“Oh, heavens no. Did you say your partner’s name is Craig?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not sure whether Craig would be agreeable.”

“Believe me, it’s not an issue.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Oh, come up. I insist. You can meet Lisa.”

They walked up to the second floor. The entire floor was Matheson and Craig’s apartment. The apartment door was deep rich mahogany. The floors

were dark hardwood with twelve-foot-high ceilings and huge windows accenting the contemporary furniture in the apartment. The television was on with a very low volume in the living room. Craig was in the kitchen cooking dinner, and Lisa was in her bedroom.

“Craig,” Matheson called out, “you will never believe who I met outside.” Craig was washing lettuce under running water. He knew Matheson was speaking but couldn’t clearly hear his words. He turned off the water faucet, grabbed a dishtowel, and entered the living room while drying his hands. He walked toward Matheson and Tracey. He recognized Tracey.

Matheson’s voice was filled with excitement. “Craig, this Tracey . . . my ex-wife. Tracey, this is Craig Cambridge. Tracey, I’m sorry, what last name do you go by now?”

Tracey was too embarrassed to tell Matheson that she kept his last name after the divorce.

“King.”

Craig reached out and shook Tracey’s hands. Craig was stunned.

“Tracey, it’s a pleasure.”

“It’s nice to meet you as well.” They were both cordial each thinking about the circumstances in which they first met in North Carolina.

“I didn’t know you were bringing company, Matt.”

“Actually, I ran into Tracey downstairs. She was visiting her friend up the block.”

Craig smiled at Tracey uneasily. “Oh . . . I see,” Craig replied.

Matheson scurried into his bedroom, pulled off his tie as he listened to Craig and Tracey’s conversation.

“Do you live in the city?” Craig asked.

“Yes, uptown. I’ve been here a couple of years now. Not many friends though. I’ve been somewhat of a recluse. Quite frankly, there isn’t much time given my hours at the investment bank.”

“You’re a banker?” asked Craig.

“Yes, a partner at Dale, Walton & Pierce.”

“How impressive. What industry do you cover?”

“I create investment solutions for financial service businesses, such as consulting and brokerage firms. I also facilitate merger and acquisition deals. How about you?”

“I’m a senior partner at Cutler & Haig law firm in midtown.”

“Even more impressive,” she remarked.

“Not at all,” he replied.

Matheson was pleased and excited to see Tracey again and to hear she had a successful career. He reached for his car keys clearly planning to do more than just go up the block for a drink. He thought he might need to take Tracey home that evening. His exuberance appeared like a teenager who was going on his first date. Lisa came out of her bedroom.

“Daddy Craig, may I have a snack before I start my homework?”

“Dinner will be ready soon, sweetheart,” Craig replied.

“Daddy Matt, are you going somewhere?”

“Yes, I met up with an old friend today, and we are having a drink this evening.” Craig was surprised to hear since Matt had not yet told him that he and Tracey were going out.

“Lisa, this is Ms. Tracey.”

“Hello, Ms. Tracey.”

“Hello, Lisa. How are you today?”

“I’m fine.”

“How old are you?”

“I’m six and a half.”

“My, you’re a big girl and very pretty too.”

“Thank you.”

“What grade are you in?”

“I’m in the first grade. My teacher’s name is Mrs. Rich. I like her a lot, but the class laughs at her when she burps.”

“Lisa, that’s not polite,” said Craig.

“But it’s true. After lunch, she constantly burps.”

“OK, OK, that’s enough,” Craig chuckled.

“I can read, write my name, and I play the violin, and I take ballet.”

“That’s tremendous, Lisa,” said Tracey. “Perhaps one day I’ll see you play the violin at Carnegie Hall.”

“You sound like Daddy Matt. He says the same thing to me.” Tracey looked at Matt.

“Get your homework so we can finish it before dinner,” said Craig. Lisa exited the room.

“Tracey, can I get you anything, a glass of juice? water?” asked Craig.

Matheson excitedly replied for Tracey, “No . . . no. We’re leaving now.”

Craig seriously asked, “Where are you two going?”

Tracey was about to respond when Matheson interjected, “I’m not sure yet.”

At the same time, a news story appeared on television reporting on Jasper’s trial. As an attorney, Craig’s attention quickly focused on the broadcast. He raised the volume of the television.

The reporter continued, “Today in the case of Jasper Anson Cunningham, we heard testimony by his former lover Tracey Bodden, who you see walking from the courtroom earlier today.” The television displayed footage of Tracey entering the courthouse with reporters following her. Matheson now focused closely on the television with Craig. “Ms. Bodden testified today that she plotted to murder Jasper Cunningham’s deceased wife, Laura, with the defendant. She also testified that she had known about the hundreds of millions of dollars the defendant is accused of embezzling, yet she chose not to bring this information to the attention of the authorities

months ago. Furthermore, Ms. Bodden accused the defendant of being responsible for an alleged rape and beating that occurred at her apartment while Jasper Cunningham awaited trial. This trial has more acts than a soap opera. Back to you, Bill.”

Craig lowered the volume of the television. The room was silent. Tracey was mortified. She stood numb. Craig and Matheson were also in shock. They looked at Tracey puzzled. In their brief re-acquaintance, Tracey conveyed so many lies.

“It didn’t happen the way they reported it,” Tracey desperately responded.

Matheson was speechless. His previous exuberance had withered. He placed his car keys down on the coffee table and sat in an armchair in a daze. Craig felt a need to break the silence.

“The Cunningham trial is quite a sensational story. Tracey, as a trial lawyer, I’m fully aware of the power of the media.” Matheson remained silent.

“Look, I should leave,” Tracey remarked and quickly headed for the apartment door. Craig glanced at Matheson who was staring blindly in thin air and decided to follow Tracey. She turned around and said to Craig, “It was nice to meet you. I apologize for coming up.” Tracey looked over at Matheson on the chair. She wanted to say something but didn’t know what to express.

Craig said, “I’m sorry for Matt’s behavior.”

“No, don’t be. I’m totally embarrassed. I shouldn’t have been here.” Forgetting where she was and to whom she was speaking with, Tracey broke down in tears. “This is all a nightmare! Everything . . . my whole life is ruined!” Craig awkwardly hugged Tracey as she wept on his chest. “I can’t go back to my job. Not after today. My credibility, my reputation, my career, dear god, I’m ruined.” Tracey sobbed, weak and distraught. Suddenly, she realized she was embracing Craig and said, “Oh my goodness, I apologize. I don’t even know you. I need to leave. I’m so sorry.”

Matheson heard Tracey's heartfelt anguish. It was difficult for Matheson to conceive that Tracey had found herself in this quagmire. The pristine Southern housewife he once loved was now entangled in sordid affairs, including rape and murder conspiracies. What had gone so negatively wrong in her life that her judgment was so skewed? Had it been a result of their relationship? Was he somehow responsible, even in part, for the dreadful turn in her life?

Craig was closing the door behind Tracey, and she headed down the flight of stairs when Matheson sprung out of his seat.

"Tracey . . . Wait!" Matheson met her in the hallway.

"Let's go have that drink and talk."

They walked a few blocks to the Greenwich Village Hotel, Restaurant and Bar. Matheson held out a chair, and Tracey slowly sat down at the table tired and drawn.

"Are you hungry?" Matheson asked.

"No, not particularly."

"Have you eaten today?" he asked with concern.

"What do you think?"

The waitress approached. "Can you get the lady a cream of asparagus soup and a french baguette to start? We'll play it by ear from there."

"Absolutely, sir. Anything for you?"

"I'll have a Caesar salad, dressing on the side, extra anchovies."

"Certainly, sir. Any cocktails for the table?"

Matheson looked at Tracey trying to recall what she liked. "Are you still a California Chardonnay lady?"

"That would be nice."

"We'll have a bottle of Vintage Reserve California Chardonnay."

"Certainly, sir."

“Thank you.” The waitress walked off. “Tracey, I had no idea what you had been going through.”

“Please . . . no pity.”

“I am not feeling sorry for you, Tracey.” Matheson realized he chose the wrong words to begin and regrouped his thoughts. “The challenges that you face . . . you don’t deserve. This man that is on trial . . . I can’t imagine the pain he caused you. I know in your heart and soul you thought you were simply doing what was right . . . for the right reasons. You’re a beautiful woman who has gone unappreciated by people . . . by men in your life . . . certainly by me. I should have handled our breakup more maturely. I apologize for how I treated you and the pain it must have caused.”

“Why didn’t you come to me and talk to me about your being gay.”

“Well, I’m bisexual, Tracey,” he corrected her.

“Sorry, bisexual. Why were you living a double life?”

“Quite honestly, I had always known. Like so many other men, I denied my sexuality all of my life.”

“Was Craig the only man you cheated on me with?”

“I’d rather not go there.”

“Well, your response alone has answered my question.” There was a long pause.

Knowing Tracey deserved an honest answer, Matheson replied, “No . . . there were a few other men . . . and a couple of women.”

“You son of a bitch! Was I so bad a wife that you couldn’t see it in you to be honest to me?”

“Tracey, this was not about you. It truly was a result of me . . . trying to find myself. When I met Craig, I found a completeness that I yearned. It was grueling living in deceit.”

“Your promiscuity left me infertile.”

“Oh god, Tracey, I am so sorry. I could never make it up to you.” There was a long pause again. They finished eating, left the restaurant, and walked

down Hudson Street. They felt reconnected.

“Don’t misunderstand, Tracey. I loved you dearly. I meant it every time I said it to you. I meant it the first time when we married and even still today. I still love you.”

“What are you saying, Matheson?”

“I’ll confess. When I saw you today, my heart raced. I wanted so much to hug you. I wanted to let you know I never meant to hurt you. I never had a chance to formally apologize. I’m so very sorry, Tracey.” They continued walking without speaking. Tracey stopped and stood in front of Matheson.

“Hold me, Matheson.” They embraced.

“Kiss me, Matheson.”

“Oh, Tracey. I’m in a fully committed relationship. Craig is my spouse. We have a daughter. And I’ve learned from my years of infidelity . . . the pain that betrayal can inflict.”

Tracey was crushed but tried to be proud. “Enough said. It has been a tremendously difficult day for me today. I need to head home.”

“What will you do?”

“I don’t know. I think it’s time to leave New York City. I don’t have a choice. I may return to Georgia. I’ll be closer to Uncle Harold . . . to visit him more often. He’s all I have now. The South feels safe right now. I may hook up with a small bank down there that hasn’t seen or read about the trial.” She knew any future career in banking would be impossible but chose to remain positive.

“Hey, I’m surprised you never changed your last name.”

“Oh . . . yeah . . . you caught that on the news today, huh?”

“Yes, I did, Ms. King,” he mockingly said. Then he looked at her seriously. “Will you keep in touch?”

“Let’s do that. It would be nice,” she replied. Deep down inside, however, they both knew they would not speak again. But Matheson was hopeful.

“I would like for you to be part of our lives. Especially Lisa’s life. She could use a strong role model.”

“It seems like you both are doing a fine job with her.”

“I’m happy with her development. I’m happy with our family life.”
They paused. Tracey wished she could say the same.

“Take care, Matheson.”

“Good luck, Tracey.” They hugged and parted.

The Trial and Sentencing Part II

The following morning was as typical as other mornings; the courtroom was packed with reporters and journalists. Ramone was in front of reporters pontificating negative rhetoric about Jasper and the case. Cameramen were broadcasting the events live. There was a sketch artist drawing Jasper and the prosecutor.

Court Officer: All rise. Judge Hartford presiding.

Judge: Will the prosecutor call his next witness.

Prosecutor: I'd like to call Eva Henderson to the stand.

Laura's best friend walked through the courtroom sternly looking straight ahead. Her navy blue two-piece pants suit and white oxford shirt made her appear uptight. She was sworn in.

Prosecutor: Please state your name and relationship to the defendant.

Eva: My name is Eva Henderson. The defendant's deceased wife, Laura, and I were best friends.

Prosecutor: For how many years did you know Laura?

Eva: Laura and I were friends for about four years. We met right after they were married.

Prosecutor: Did you ever witness any violent behavior by the defendant toward his wife, Laura?

Eva: Not at first. But after a year or so, yes. Oh yes . . . yes, I have.

Prosecutor: Where?

Eva: At the Cunningham home.

Prosecutor: Please describe what you saw.

Eva: Well, there was one night in particular that Laura and I were in their family room planning one of our semiannual vacations about two years ago. (Eva smiled from the memory of Laura.) One of our goals was to visit every continent in the world in our lifetime. We couldn't decide on a

country, so we were studying several countries in a three-week Saturday class that was held at a nearby university. We were looking at travel information to South America. We were specifically joking about traveling to Rio during carnival time. Neither of us would have been interested in the crowds, but we were hypothesizing in jest.

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“We can join one of the bands in the parade and dance through the streets of Rio naked,” said Laura.

“No, better yet, let’s visit one of the brothels and work a few women and men for an orgasmic vacation,” Eva joked. Jasper overheard as he walked into the room. He had just arrived home from work late. Several client deals had fallen through that day, and he was upset and tense from the financial implications.

“What’s going on here?” he questioned.

“Hi, hun. We’re going over our notes from travel class to help decide on our next adventure,” Laura innocently replied.

Ignoring Laura’s reply, he asked, “Eva, what were you just saying to my wife?”

“We were clowning around about carnival in Rio,” Eva laughed.

“No, you were talking about sleeping with men and women and having orgasms.”

Eva and Laura realized Jasper was responding seriously and that he misinterpreted their cajoling.

“Hey, calm down, we were just joking around,” said Laura as she walked up, kissed him, and massaged his shoulders.

Jasper did not reciprocate the kiss and stopped her massaging. He faced Laura half-heartedly and asked, “Have you been messing around on me? Are you seeing someone else when I’m not home?” Jasper looked at Eva then back at Laura suspiciously. “I know you like sucking pussy. Is it yours, Eva?” he asked in a mistrustful manner.

“Jasper, you’re being paranoid!” Eva loudly proclaimed.

“Paranoid?” Jasper shouted. “Eva, get your lesbian ass out of my house now!” He grabbed her travel books and threw them across the room toward the front door. Eva did not move. Laura remained still and silent.

“What are you doing? What are you talking about?” asked Eva.

Jasper ignored Eva and addressed Laura who was sitting next to Eva. “I get out of this house every day to deal with the stresses of Wall Street, and you’re home planning how to cheat on me? How to fuck other women?”

Laura replied, “You’re overreacting, Jasper.”

“Overreacting?” Jasper slapped Laura in the face.

Eva jumped up and screamed, “I’m calling the police.”

“No, don’t,” cried Laura. Laura held her face in her hands and was in tears. “Eva, you better leave now.”

“Laura, he is hurting you. There is no reason for this abuse.”

“Eva, it’s not what you think,” she justified. “It’s just husband and wife stuff. Jasper had a hard day.”

“Husband and wife stuff? Hard day? Why are you rationalizing his behavior?” Eva looked deeply at Laura’s face and asked, “This is not unusual, is it?”

“Eva, just leave,” Laura said softly.

“Laura—” started Eva.

Jasper could no longer contain himself and shouted, “Would you get your books and get the fuck out of my house, dike!”

Eva sympathetically looked at Laura and, with despise, at Jasper and left.

Present Day: Return to the Trial of Jasper Cunningham

Prosecutor: Ms. Henderson, why didn’t you call the police?

Eva: Well, I walked outside to my car, and as soon as I got in, my cell phone rang. It was Laura pleading with me to stay silent as they had too much to lose . . . not to mention the embarrassment it would cause her family. So I remained silent. I heard Jasper in the background yelling at her to hang up the phone. I regret it now.

Prosecutor: Ms. Henderson, have you ever witnessed Mr. Cunningham's infidelity?

Eva: Yes. After that episode, Laura was not "allowed" to travel with me anymore. Then the strangest coincidence occurred. I was on a vacation trip to Versailles with two girlfriends. We were having lunch at an outdoor French bistro on a Saturday afternoon. At first, I could not be sure, but from a distance, I thought I had seen Jasper strolling down Marguerite Place with a woman and a child. The woman had her arms around Jasper, and he was holding the hand of the child. She had kissed Jasper on the cheek as they walked. They strolled like lovers . . . like a family. It was awkward for me to attempt to run down the street and catch up to them, so I let it go. And quite frankly, I wasn't sure just how he would respond to me. That evening, I called Laura who was in New York from my hotel room. She was excited to hear from me because she had just learned that she was pregnant, and she was home alone. She confirmed that Jasper was in France on business, but she could not locate him. At that point, I was totally convinced it was him who I saw that day. However, I left Versailles the following afternoon and did not run into him again.

Prosecutor: Were there any other events that you would like to share with the court?

Eva: Laura shared with me the times that Jasper had forced himself on her sexually while she was pregnant—

Jasper: Objection, Your Honor. Hearsay.

Judge: Sustained. The jury will disregard the witness's last comment.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Ms. Henderson, no further questions.

Judge: Does the defense have any questions?

Jasper: Yes, Your Honor. Ms. Henderson, are you a lesbian?

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor, relevance?

Judge: Cunningham, where are you going with this line of questioning?

Jasper: I intend to show that the witness was having an affair with my wife and that her testimony was biased.

Judge: Get there quickly. Overruled.

Jasper: Ms. Henderson, are you a lesbian?

Eva: I don't see what that has to do with how you abused Laura.

Judge: Please answer the question, Ms. Henderson.

Eva: Yes, I am.

Jasper: Did you have sexual feelings for my wife, Ms. Henderson?

Eva: Of course not. Do you have sexual feelings for every person you see that is of the sexual persuasion of YOUR choice?

Judge: Please, Ms. Henderson, just answer the questions so we can move along.

Jasper: Did you desire my wife sexually?

Eva: No.

Jasper: Did you oftentimes invite my wife to lesbian affairs at your home?

Eva: I don't have lesbian affairs at my home. Laura attended many cocktail parties I hosted at my house for family and friends.

Jasper: Do you currently have, or even in the past four years, have you had a "significant other" relationship?

Eva: I've dated.

Jasper: Aren't you contriving these stories about alleged abuse and sightings in Europe because you were jealous of the loving relationship I had with my wife?

Eva: No, Jasper, don't flatter yourself.

Jasper: Weren't you always trying to convince Laura to leave me and for her to go live with you?

Eva: Yes, because you abused her. I wanted her to know she had a place to stay where she would be safe and loved.

Jasper: Oh, yes, where she would be LOVED.

Eva: Not in a sexual—

Jasper: No further questions.

Judge: Does the prosecution want to reexamine?

Prosecutor: No, Your Honor.

Judge: Please call your next witness.

Prosecutor: The State calls Dr. Deepak Ramish to the stand.

Dr. Ramish was the obstetrician who delivered Magnus when Laura was rushed into the emergency room after the car accident. He was a young doctor under forty years of age with a youthful look. He wore a tan suit and walked confidently to the stand. He was sworn in.

Prosecutor: How long have you been practicing, Dr. Ramish?

Dr. Ramish: I've been an emergency room obstetrician/gynecologist for seven years. Before that, I did my residency for four years.

Prosecutor: About how many babies would you say you delivered in your career?

Dr. Ramish: Oh, nearly two thousand. I've delivered at a higher rate than most since I work in the emergency room.

Prosecutor: Were you the obstetrician on staff at St. Mary's Hospital on the night Laura Cunningham was brought into the emergency room?

Dr. Ramish: Yes, I was.

Prosecutor: Did you deliver Laura Cunningham's son named Magnus Cunningham?

Dr. Ramish: Yes, I did.

Prosecutor: Can you describe for the court the events leading up to the delivery of Magnus and ultimately the death of Laura Cunningham.

Dr. Ramish: When Ms. Cunningham was admitted, she had lost a tremendous amount of blood. Her blood pressure started to drop, and the cervical dilation ceased, so we were forced to perform a cesarean section. After the baby was born, she took a sharp turn for the worst. Mrs. Cunningham had fractured ribs from the car accident and a broken leg, but we had stabilized her enough so that the trauma would be manageable. It was surprising that she was unable to overcome the effect of the injuries.

Prosecutor: What are you saying, Doctor?

Dr. Ramish: Well, I questioned Mrs. Cunningham's cause of death. She was an otherwise healthy woman. Once we delivered the baby, it was not medically likely that the injuries from the car accident would have killed her. So I ordered an autopsy.

Prosecutor: What did the autopsy reveal?

Dr. Ramish: The autopsy disclosed an unusually high amount of tranquilizers in Mrs. Cunningham's bloodstream.

Prosecutor: Was it evident in the baby's bloodstream?

Dr. Ramish: Only at very, very low levels indicating it had not yet begun to pass through the placenta. The extremely low levels in the baby's bloodstream and the high levels in Ms. Cunningham's body suggested Laura Cunningham ingested an overdose of tranquilizers right before the car accident. The autopsy results revealed that the high levels of tranquilizers, the administration of penicillin, and the spinal epidural to anesthetize her lower body to perform the cesarean section proved to be a fatal combination that caused her heart to give out.

Prosecutor: Was there any medical reason Ms. Cunningham would have had tranquilizers in her system?

Dr. Ramish: The doses in her system were extreme. Her medical physician and regular obstetrician could not explain. The bottle was a later found in her pocketbook. We learned the prescription was not for her but written out for Eva Henderson.

Prosecutor: (*The prosecutor was surprised by this allegation.*) Are you suggesting that Eva Henderson provided Laura Cunningham with tranquilizers? And that either Ms. Cunningham had intentionally ingested an unusually high dose of tranquilizers, or someone may have poisoned her?

Dr. Ramish: All of those are likely possibilities. But may I just make another comment?

Prosecutor: Please.

Dr. Ramish: When Ms. Cunningham passed away, there was a woman in the waiting room at the hospital claiming to be her sister.

Prosecutor: Dr. Ramish, the deceased did not have any sisters.

Dr. Ramish: Yes, I wasn't aware at the time. I later learned the woman who claimed to be Mrs. Cunningham's sister was Tracey Bodden.

Prosecutor Wynn was surprised by his testimony.

Prosecutor: Thank you. No further questions.

Judge: Does the defense have any questions?

It was the first time Jasper had heard this account. Could Laura have been suicidal? Why did Eva provide Laura with tranquilizers? Did Tracey somehow have any responsibility for the tranquilizers in Laura's body at the hospital?

Jasper: Yes, Your Honor. Dr. Ramish, why didn't the hospital test my wife's bloodstream when she arrived to learn whether there were any drugs in her system?

Dr. Ramish: It is not standard procedure to do so when a patient in her traumatic condition is brought into the emergency room. Every second is vital. We could be testing for many things unnecessarily and, in the interim, losing precious time to save the life of the mother and baby.

Jasper: Well, this time you gambled and killed my wife.

Prosecution: Objection, Your Honor. Move to strike.

Judge: Sustained. The jury will disregard the last comment made by the defendant.

Jasper: Is it possible that Tracey Bodden gained access to my wife in the hospital and administered the tranquilizers?

Dr. Ramish: No, not at all possible. Ms. Cunningham was in our care 100 percent of the time.

Jasper: To be clear for the court, if the hospital had checked my wife's blood levels, they would have detected the tranquilizers that Eva Henderson likely provided Laura, and she would be alive today. Correct?

Dr. Ramish: Mr. Cunningham, the hospital and the staff on duty, including myself, were absolved of any negligence by our internal review board. While we are very sorry for what happened to your wife, we did everything in our medical power to save her. The tranquilizers she ingested would have gone unknown had I not requested the autopsy.

Jasper: No further questions for the witness.

Judge: Recross, Prosecutor Wynn?

Prosecutor: No, Your Honor.

Judge: Call your next witness.

Prosecutor: (*Prosecutor Wynn debated whether or not to recall Eva.*) Your Honor, the State would like to take a three-hour recess.

Judge: Prosecutor, we just started today.

Prosecutor: In light of Dr. Ramish's testimony, we need to follow up on the new allegations and resume later.

Judge: (*Clearly irritated.*) We'll resume after lunch at two o'clock. (*The judge banged his gavel.*)

Frustrated from Dr. Ramish's revelations, Prosecutor Wynn left the courtroom and headed to his office. He was puzzled why there were several meetings with Eva and Dr. Ramish prior to the trial; however, the tranquilizers were never mentioned. Wynn suspected Jasper may have

influenced Dr. Ramish to falsify his testimony. It was the break the prosecution needed. He had three hours and needed to act quickly.

Prosecutor Wynn called a court officer to his office.

“Do not allow Dr. Ramish to leave the building. Grab him and bring him to the office next door until I contact you.”

To substantiate his theory further, Prosecutor Wynn called Eva Henderson on her cell phone and caught her as she was leaving the courthouse. Eva told Prosecutor Wynn that she was unable to return.

“You had better find the time right now to get up to my office before I have my detectives pick you up for your role in the death of Laura Cunningham,” said Prosecutor Wynn.

“You must be joking. I was only a friend to her.”

“I suggest you find your way to my office now.”

Fifteen minutes later, Eva arrived at Prosecutor Wynn’s office.

“What is this all about?”

“Have a seat, Ms. Henderson.”

“No need. I’d rather stand,” she replied.

“Have a goddamn seat right now, Ms. Henderson!”

“Hey, I don’t like your tone.” Eva sat at the conference table while Prosecutor Wynn paced his office. “I’ll ask you again, what is this about?”

“Why didn’t you tell me that you gave Laura Cunningham your prescription for tranquilizers?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Are you falsely suggesting that you do not have tranquilizers?”

“No, I have a prescription. But what does that have to do with Laura’s death?”

“She overdosed on your pills.”

“That’s impossible! She knew I had them . . . but I never gave it to her! Dear god, she must have taken them from my apartment. No surprise with all of the stress that Jasper was putting her under.”

“She was pregnant for God’s sake.”

“It wasn’t my fault.”

“Ms. Henderson, you sound foolish, and I know you’re a smart, educated woman. So I’m going to conclude that you must think I’m an idiot. You’ve already made me look like an idiot before the court today by not telling me about your drug pushing.”

“Wait a minute. You’re going too far with this. I had no idea.”

“What the hell did you do to my case? I should have you arrested right now!”

Prosecutor Wynn paced the office. Eva appeared worried.

“Do I need to call an attorney?”

“At this time, no. But make sure you don’t go anywhere. And I mean anywhere!”

Eva left Prosecutor Wynn’s office shaken. However, he believed Eva, and therefore, Dr. Ramish’s testimony was sound. He called the court officer and told him to release Dr. Ramish.

Prosecutor Wynn was back to square one. He had to pursue the other charges against Jasper more aggressively. He quickly made a call and had detectives pick up his surprise witness. They brought the witness to Prosecutor Wynn’s office and he held a one hour debriefing to prepare his witness to take the stand.

It was now two o’clock, and the court reconvened.

Judge: Prosecutor Wynn, please call your next witness.

Prosecutor: If it pleases the court, Your Honor . . . there has been a change in my witnesses. The State calls Antonio Ignacio to the stand.

Jasper was about to object due to the lack of advanced notice. But he realized this was an opportunity to take a tremendous turn in the outcome of

his case. Judge Hartford looked at Jasper expecting he would object, but Jasper remained silent.

Judge: Very well.

Antonio Ignacio entered the courtroom exceptionally somber. His stern demeanor revealed that he was subpoenaed to testify. Dressed in a \$5,000 dark gray suit, white shirt with a pink-and-gray tie, he confidently took the witness stand, was sworn in, sat down, and calmly crossed his legs.

Prosecutor: Can you state your full name for the court.

Antonio: Antonio Alonzo Ignacio.

Prosecutor: Mr. Ignacio, please tell the court . . . in what capacity do you know the defendant?

Antonio: Jasper and I first met about fifteen years ago. We worked on Wall Street early in our careers. We pitched deals and closed major merger transactions. (*Antonio reminisced and smiled in a pompous manner.*) We made a lot of money for those corporate executive hustlers.

Prosecutor: And did you continue your contact with Jasper over the years?

Antonio: No. I went to work for my father, God rest his soul. (*He made the sign of the cross on his body with his right hand.*)

Prosecutor: I'm sorry for your loss. What is the name of your father's company?

Antonio: Ignacio Industry.

Prosecutor: Where is the company located?

Antonio: Outside of Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Prosecutor: What type of business was this?

Antonio: Steel and iron works, primarily.

Prosecutor: When did you reunite with the defendant?

Antonio: He called me about three years ago trying to solicit business. (*Antonio lied.*) He said he had studied the growth potential of my firm and

thought he could provide some fresh business perspectives on ways we could raise cash and grow. I figured I'd help him out.

Prosecutor: Please continue.

Antonio: So I invited him out to my home. Jasper is a shrewd businessman. He came up with acquisition strategies and a stock issuance plan that I hadn't even fathomed. So after we reviewed his investment proposals, we proceeded with the deals. We settled the business contract even though at the time I needed to focus on the fact that my father was just found murdered. I wanted to help Jasper out. He seemed pretty desperate.

Prosecutor: Did your company make a profit from the defendant's work?

Antonio: At first. Sure. Yeah. It was a huge profit to the company. But the stock market eventually went against us, and the company folded. Thank God my father didn't live to see that day. We blame Cunningham for the collapse. He overinflated the value of the companies we bought every step of the way. He and his partners were as unethical as you could imagine. They stole millions from our business.

Prosecutor: Your Honor, the court would like to submit exhibits I through K. They represent copies of three bank accounts of Ignacio Industries faxed over to our offices a half an hour ago.

Judge: Evidence admitted.

Prosecutor: (*Prosecutor Wynn handed the bank statements over to Antonio and a copy to Jasper.*) Mr. Ignacio, can you read to the court the amounts from these bank account transfers for each of these transactions.

Antonio: I don't need to read them. I know each by heart. These are transactions representing Cunningham's theft. On April 13th, \$20 million. On April 26th, \$27 million. On May 6th, \$42 million. It was a total of \$89 million stolen by Cunningham.

Prosecutor: Once your firm discovered the suspicious cash movement, how did you begin to investigate?

Antonio: There were fund transfers made on three separate occasions to intraday holding accounts which were automatically swept nightly to an account in the name of Annette Johnson. We later found out this was the name of the defendant's mother who had been dead for over ten years. The account was closed after the three transactions cleared and the money withdrawn. There was no way to trace the current location of the funds.

Prosecutor: Thank you, Mr. Ignacio. No further questions.

Antonio could not mention the \$600 million that Jasper embezzled from the illegal deals. The large sums of money could not be legally substantiated.

Judge: Defense?

Jasper: (*He stood up and shouted in an alarming voice from the attorney's chair.*) Did you, Mr. Ignacio, kill your father in cold blood?

Antonio: (*He was taken aback by Jasper's bold and arrogant statement.*) I couldn't be more disgusted by your accusation! Of course I had nothing to do with the death of my father! (*Antonio was infuriated. He wanted to end Jasper's life right at that moment.*)

Jasper: Are you and your family associated with the Colombian drug running business?

Antonio: You son of a bitch!

Judge: (*The judge banged his gavel.*) Please refrain from the editorials and answer the question.

Antonio: (*He calmed down.*) No, we certainly are not. Let me make it clear right now. I don't know anything about or have any affiliation with illegal activities.

Jasper: Then can you tell the court how are you currently earning a living since your family's business went bankrupt? You own a multimillion-dollar mansion in Michigan, don't you?

Antonio: I established a jewelry business.

Jasper: That's an odd transition, Mr. Ignacio?

Antonio: Not really. (*He sarcastically addressed Jasper.*) Gold and silver are on the periodic table of elements alongside iron and nickel. They're just worth more.

Some members of the courtroom chuckled.

Jasper: But you're not only dealing with gold and silver, are you?

Antonio: Well, of course not. We also sell diamonds.

Prosecutor: Objection, Your Honor. This line of questioning has no relevance to this case. This witness has testified as to the theft conducted by Mr. Cunningham, which is completely unrelated to Mr. Ignacio's current business affairs.

Jasper: Your Honor, the witness's line of work is precisely why I believe there is this ridiculous evidence of misappropriated money.

Judge: I'll let it continue. Overruled.

Jasper: Mr. Ignacio, please tell the court . . . who are your diamond suppliers and distributors?

Antonio: I can't disclose that information. My business contacts are silent partners, and the new company is not publicly held.

Jasper paused as he treaded carefully with his line of questioning. Jasper knew he had nothing to lose by being direct because he had already crossed the demarcation line and that Antonio wanted him dead. Jasper reflected back on when he met Antonio's diamond suppliers.

September 2003, Nine Months before Jasper's Arrest

Jasper sat in a Botswanan restaurant on the upper east side of New York in a private dining room with Thapelo Jobe. Jobe sat in a huge dark walnut leather chair at the head of the dining table that sat eight people, but only Jasper and two of Jobe's "counselors" were eating in the room. Every so often, a waitress would enter with various small portions of Botswanan foods and dark rum for the men. Jobe smoked a huge cigar while he ate his meal. Jasper viewed his behavior as crude and evident of the disregard Jobe had for him, a nonsmoker. But Jasper was not there to make Jobe's acquaintance or evaluate his manners.

Jobe was six feet five inches with a dark complexion and bald head. His eyes were watery, and the whites were deep yellow. Jobe had seen significant human atrocities, crime, and struggle in his life as a child during the Angolan revolutionary resistance where he was born. His father was a rebel leader, and his family was exiled to Botswana when he was a teenager. Jobe had a strong Botswanan accent, and oftentimes, Jasper found it difficult to understand precisely what Jobe had said, but Jasper was reluctant to ask Jobe to repeat himself to avoid being disrespectful.

Jobe's upbringing as a child was militant. His teachings, largely by his father, had several themes: dominate the people, eradicate Europeans, and use violence to achieve these goals. His views as an adult continued to surround those precepts contrary to his education at London's Oxford University School of Political Science. His father envisioned Jobe returning to Angola in the future to become prime minister and carry out his father's objectives. But Jobe was overcome by money and greed. He rationalized his diamond smuggling as a means to raise the necessary capital to fund his future political endeavors. Although financial resources were more than sufficient to enable his return to Angola, Jobe continued to grow his diamond smuggling connections and broaden his personal wealth.

"Why are you doing business with that crook Ignacio?" Jobe questioned.

Jasper replied, "I don't judge his affairs. Antonio provides opportunities for me to expand my business."

"Ignacio is a Colombian white man with an Italian name. How can you even trust that mixed-up fool? We supplied his kind for years with diamonds from our African mines because his color was more accepted across the globe. My people were shut out of negotiations simply because we are black Africans. But times have now changed, my brother. Those bloodsucking Europeans are no longer needed. We control our inventory now. We can handle distribution on our own."

"Mr. Jobe, I am not a diamond distributor. I work for Antonio in the capacity of accounting advisor and business consultant. I am a legitimate businessman."

“Ha, ha,” Jobe laughed out loud. “Legitimate?” he very deliberately remarked in his heavy accent. “What nonsense do you speak of? There is nothing legitimate about the company you keep.” He puffed on his cigar. “If you were legitimate, you would not be here in my presence today! If Ignacio was legitimate, he wouldn’t be as wealthy as he is. We are all businessmen. We have our own laws . . . our own rules . . . our own realm of legitimacy.”

As the conversation progressed, Jasper became increasingly uncomfortable around Jobe and wanted to know why Jobe requested the meeting.

“Mr. Jobe, I am enjoying your native food, but surely we are here to discuss more than the appropriateness of Ignacio’s affairs.”

Ignoring Jasper’s comment, Jobe bitterly remarked, “White men have come to my country, and they used my people to mine land that is my people’s God-given right. Then we were cheated into turning over the diamonds, our wealth, to Europeans and their descendants to become rich on our backs . . . with our sweat . . . with our blood. Vultures like Antonio represent those who we must rightfully take back what is due to us, to our people . . . to our ancestors.”

“No disrespect, Mr. Jobe,” Jasper began, “but your country is not poor. Your people enjoy a gross national product per capita in Botswana that is seven times higher than the average for sub-Saharan Africa.” Jasper was proud of the research he had done in preparation for his mysterious meeting.

Jobe looked at his counselor to his right and spoke directly to him, “You see how this black man has been brainwashed. First he says ‘your people’ as though he is not a black man just the same. Then he thinks \$3,600 per capita is money to applaud in the global economy.”

Recognizing Jobe’s anger, Jasper is apologetic, “You’re right, I am not looking at the global picture. Forgive me.”

“Enough of this talk,” said Jobe. “Here are my propositions to you. Proposition 1. You work for Ignacio, and you continue to be enslaved in his entourage of Colombians—pseudo white men—waiting to shoot you in the

temple. Proposition 2. Partner with me . . . your people who you could trust and further your quest for wealth and power. I have much more to offer you, and it sparkles.” Jobe laughed again and puffed his cigar. “Ignacio does not know what he wants! They are drug-dealing pushers trying to take over diamond affairs they know nothing about. He is using you, my brother. Ignacio is only a middleman, and his usefulness short-lived. I have established connections with the major brokers across the U.S., internationally for that matter.” Jobe laughed again. He banged his hand on the table and puffed his cigar. “What will it be, Jasper Cunningham?”

Jasper was totally confused. Jobe had invited him to this business dinner without any context. Jasper had not even known Jobe was connected to Antonio. Could it be a setup by Antonio? Did Jobe want to use Jasper to infiltrate Antonio’s operations? Jasper’s entire world had become criminally entangled with drug trafficking, murder, and now diamond smuggling. Who is this constantly laughing buffoon before him? Jasper looked at the two men beside Jobe. Was there really a proposition? Jasper thought he would be killed if he left the restaurant without satisfying Jobe’s intent to bring down Antonio.

Jasper raised his glass and asserted in a low loosely confident voice, “We are in business, Jobe.”

With a grin on his face, Jobe raised his glass and sternly said, “The white man has stolen diamond profits from our people for years. Let us, you and I, brothers, begin to regain what is rightfully ours.”

Present Day: Trial

Jasper: Mr. Ignacio, were you connected to the Botswanan diamond smuggler Thapelo Jobe?

Antonio: Who? Othello who?

There is laughter in the courtroom.

Jasper: Do you have any affiliation with Thapelo Jobe, the renowned diamond smuggler?

Antonio: Never heard of him.

The Year 2004, One Month before Jasper's Arrest

Jasper sat amongst Antonio, Jobe, and their bodyguards at a neutrally located warehouse in Scranton, Pennsylvania. It was six months after Jasper first met Jobe and two weeks after the three transactions where Jobe and Jasper diverted a total of \$89 million from Antonio to an unknown account. Antonio was not yet aware that the \$89 million had been stolen. Antonio also was unaware that Jasper knew Jobe, and the two men behaved as though they did not know each other.

“You’re not bringing diamonds my way anymore, Jobe,” said Antonio.

Jobe facetiously behaved as though he was unaware of Antonio’s claims. “What do you mean? Mining in my country has slowed down.”

“Don’t play fucking stupid with me. I know damn well diamonds are still flowing. My contacts told me supply is surfacing on the West Coast.”

Jobe is visibly insulted. “Look, don’t start to question things you really don’t understand. Don’t disrespect me.”

“Then don’t disrespect me! All right, get serious here. I need at least one hundred clean-cut diamonds . . . minimum three carats each. And I need them to sell next month,” Antonio said.

“I am always serious. We have changed our strategies. We no longer need you to navigate our sales,” said Jobe.

“What the fuck are you saying?” asked Antonio.

“We are not here to negotiate future sales. As I said before, the pipeline is done.”

Antonio was silent and stared at Jobe.

“You are nothing but a crook who stole from us for years,” said Jobe. “It ends now.”

“Stole from you? Who the fuck are you to talk to me like that?” asked Antonio.

“Who the fuck am I?” Jobe asked rhetorically. “I made you rich. And now I am your former supplier,” Jobe said calmly.

“So that’s it? You just walk away?” asked Antonio.

“No, as a matter of fact, I don’t just walk away. You owe me.”

“Now you have fucking lost your damn mind.”

Jasper observed Antonio’s expression. Antonio was intensely angered. Jasper recalled Antonio’s face resembled the moment before he shot his father in the head.

“You have cheated me 20 percent of the price of the inventory for the past two years. That means you owe me \$300 million. I want my money.”

Antonio rose and walked around. The men accompanying Antonio and Jobe were prepared to exchange fire. “I gave your non-English-speaking ass a chance to do great fucking things for yourself in this country. You don’t even have a CLUE of what it takes to push those fucking diamonds I bought from you! I’M risking it all! If something happened to you, you’ll get deported back to some godforsaken country in goddamn nowhere. Do you fucking know what would happen to me? I would rot in a fucking prison for the rest of my life. I TOOK ON ALL OF THE FUCKING RISK. I OWE YOU NOTHING! GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY SIGHT!”

“You will regret this. You don’t know what you will be up against!”

“Are you threatening me, you bush bastard?”

All of the bodyguards drew their guns at one another.

Antonio looked at the weapons aimed at every man in the room including at him and Jobe. The end result would only be bloodshed.

“No, men. This is not worth the bullets. Jobe, I will give you the money in two weeks.”

“Make it one week,” Jobe responded.

Antonio was infuriated. How dare Jobe test him in front of his men? However, he recognized it was a lose-lose situation at that moment.

“One week it is,” Antonio retreated. Jobe grinned as everyone put away their guns.

Antonio walked off, and his men followed. Jobe and his bodyguards were right behind. All of the men left the loft and entered their respective cars. Jobe entered the backseat of his car and lit a cigar. As Jobe puffed on his cigar, the driver of his car turned around and shot Jobe point-blank in his right eye.

Antonio and Jasper sat in an adjacent car and watched the murder. Their car sped away.

Antonio shirked it off and remarked, “Jasper, just remember, I am ALWAYS prepared, and I always take action. This is not a game or pastime. This is a match . . . a deadly challenge. I accept it. And I always prevail!”

Present Day: Trial

Jasper: Your Honor, I am prepared to testify that this man, Antonio Ignacio, shot and killed his father in their home and had the body discarded. I am prepared to testify, Your Honor, that this man, Antonio Ignacio, conducted illegitimate business in many arenas including diamond smuggling, drug trafficking, forgery, racketeering, and embezzlement. I am prepared, Your Honor to testify that this man had Thapelo Jobe killed in Scranton, Pennsylvania, outside of an abandoned warehouse. I am further prepared, Your Honor, to testify that I learned of these events in his confidence, and fearful of my life, I could not previously divulge. This drug-dealing son of a bitch ruined my life!

The courtroom is in an uproar. The reporters frantically snapped pictures and wrote in their journals.

Judge: Order! Order in the court! (*He banged his gavel.*)

Antonio: (*He jumped out his seat and pointed at Jasper, forgetting he was in a court of law.*) You’re fucking crazy . . . you’re a dead man!

Jasper: Your Honor, for the record, this man is threatening my life!

Jasper hoped the court officers would take Antonio away based on Jasper’s assertions. But they did not. Neither Judge Hartford nor Prosecutor Wynn responded. Jasper had no idea how deeply connected Antonio was with the justice being served. Both Judge Hartford and Prosecutor Wynn were on Antonio’s payroll all along.

Antonio looked at Jasper and shook his head up and down. Jasper knew he would be killed.

Judge: Does the prosecution have any further witnesses?

Prosecutor: The State rests.

Judge: Would the witness please step down.

Judge: Do you have any witnesses in your defense, Jasper Cunningham?

Jasper: No, your honor.

Judge: Then we will break for today and have closing statements tomorrow at 9:30 am.

Court Officer: All rise.

Jasper: (*As the courtroom started to clear and people began to chatter, Jasper shouted.*) Your Honor, I request that I am placed in protective custody in light of the events that occurred today!

Judge: Request denied. There is no proof that you will be in any harm, Mr. Cunningham. You've maxed out your special privileges.

Outside the courtroom, reporters cornered and questioned Antonio about the accusations.

Reporter: Mr. Ignacio, what do you know about the death of your father? Were you in business with Thapelo Jobe? (*Antonio pushed his way through the crowd without answering.*)

The following morning, there were dozens more reporters at the trial. Ramone once again was standing outside of the courtroom providing his views. Jasper saw Ramone and thought, *Who does Ramone think he is, public advocate? Why does he care so much about me and my trial?* Jasper noticed Laura's parents were not in the courtroom.

Court Officer: Quiet in the court. All rise. The Honorable Judge Hartford is presiding.

Judge: Will the defendant Jasper Cunningham present closing arguments to the jury.

Jasper began, “Ladies and gentlemen, in very short order, you will retire to the jury room to decide whether or not the prosecution’s evidence was sufficient to remove any reasonable doubt about whether I did what they claim.

“Before you do, I want you to imagine what it’s like being charged with a serious crime that you didn’t commit. You are dragged out and arrested at your place of business by authorities who are crooked. Thereafter, you are placed in a filthy jail cell, unable to speak with anyone for hours. Your spouse is killed, your business partners are murdered, your attorney is setting you up, and people who you trusted turned out to be scavengers, users, and corrupt liars who help to frame you in order to save their own hide. And to top it all off, you are now faced to defend yourself against the prosecution’s evidence, or lack thereof. This, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, is what I have faced for the past eleven months. Amongst this travesty, ask yourself, wasn’t there reasonable doubt revealed during this farce of a trial?

“Let’s start with Tracey Bodden’s testimony, my investment banker who had access to all of my financial affairs. She was in possession of an offshore bank account with millions of dollars and attempted to frame me. In the midst of mobsters, Tracey was outside her league and claimed she was brutalized for it. I’ll admit, yes, Ms. Bodden offered herself to me from time to time, and I compensated her for it every night. And yes, as a happily married man, I should not have indulged. But you are not here to decide on my infidelity. Furthermore, that does not mean I conspired to murder my wife. SHE wanted my loving pregnant wife, who was carrying my firstborn son, dead. Through her own testimony, she admitted as much.

“Then there was Solae Ngane-Santos. You saw how she arrived in court, dressed more sugary than a candy cane. She solicited \$100,000 from me and planned to extort more money from me to deceive the FBI. When confronted, she claimed assault. She was playing both sides of the fence. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, those tapes were all intentionally created to sidetrack the authorities. Am I guilty for playing her charade? Yes. But please be certain none of those remarks were real.

“Speaking of the tapes, there’s the now-deceased FBI Agent Lawson. While it is upsetting that FBI Agent Lawson was murdered, he was a rotten apple in the law enforcement barrel. Half of what he said was lies, and the other half wasn’t true.” One of the jurors chuckled and smiled. “He was murdered after I exposed in this courtroom his attempts to extort money from me and identified his connections to the underworld. To Antonio Ignacio.

“This brings me to the last testimony. This justice system needs to take a closer look at Antonio Ignacio. The prosecution is barking up the wrong tree. If it looks like a drug dealer, smells like a murderer, and acts like a mobster, undoubtedly it is Antonio Ignacio. Do you get the feeling that if you opened his head, dead bodies, embezzled money, and smuggled diamonds would become visible? My crime . . . my only crime was being legally engaged to transact business with him.

“The prosecution may suggest to you that it is odd that I did not take the witness stand. Under the law, I do not have to do so. Judge Hartford will explain to you that I do not have to present any evidence. The entire burden of proof rests solely with the prosecutors, not with me. The prosecution took me from my home . . . my business . . . to try me in this court. My question to you is, Do you have a reasonable doubt as to whether or not I am guilty of these various crimes the prosecution has alleged? If you are only 90 percent sure of guilt, then you have a 10 percent doubt, which is a reasonable doubt. I say this to each one of you individually. In the event you believe there is at least one reasonable doubt that I might be wrongly accused, find me not guilty on that charge and end this nightmare I have faced. Allow me to go home and mourn the death of my wife and raise my newborn son. Thank you.”

Judge: Prosecutor Wynn, please present your closing arguments to the jury.

Prosecutor Wynn paced in front of the jurors for about thirty seconds before he began to speak. “Allow me to summarize the facts and let the evidence show Jasper Cunningham is guilty of conspiracy to murder Laura Cunningham, fourteen counts of embezzlement, twenty-four counts of intentional fraud and deception of investors, and seven counts of money

laundering. *Fact 1:* We have thirty-three days of taped conversations of Jasper Cunningham transacting embezzlements and fraudulent customer transactions. A twenty-year FBI veteran testified these tapes were actual conversations. *Fact 2:* Jasper Cunningham was an adulterer who conspired to murder his wife with his lover of two years. *Fact 3:* Testimony evidenced that his wife was abused and likely attempted to commit suicide by ingesting tranquilizers when she overheard her husband's plan to murder her. *Fact 4:* Jasper Cunningham, through his own remarks in court, conducted business with embezzlers and murderers, yet he chose to remain silent and maintained an ongoing relationship with the same man he thinks is a criminal. Jasper was caught with his entire FIST in the cookie jar. All he had to do was drop the cookie, sever his relationship with the Ignacio family. But he did not. Why? Not because he was under duress, but because that cookie was scrumptious. Jasper Cunningham is a greedy, thieving criminal who savored the treats his activities reaped. There is no other verdict to conclude except guilty on all counts. Thank you."

Judge: Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, at this point in the trial, I am required to inform you of the law governing the case against Jasper Anson Cunningham. You, as jurors, are to decide the facts. But in determining what actually happened in this case—that is, in reaching your decision as to the facts—it is your sworn duty to follow the law that I am now defining for you. Nothing said or done by the lawyers who have tried this case is to be considered by you as evidence of any fact. I caution you, members of the jury, that you are here to determine the guilt or innocence of Jasper Anson Cunningham from the evidence in this case. The defendant is not on trial for any act or conduct or offense not alleged in the indictment. Also, the punishment provided by law for the offense charged in the indictment is a matter exclusively within the province of me as judge and should never be considered by the jury or be discussed in any way in arriving at an impartial verdict as to the guilt or innocence of the accused Jasper Anson Cunningham. Finally, the law requires that all twelve jurors must agree before a verdict of either "guilty" or "not guilty" can be reached on each of the counts.

Judge Hartford banged his gavel, and the jurors exited to the deliberation room. The jury deliberated for six days before finally sending a

note stating they had reached verdicts on all of the charges. All relevant parties were summoned to the courtroom which was overflowing with reporters and interested onlookers.

Judge: Jury Foreman, have you and your fellow jurors reached a verdict?

Jury Foreman: Yes, we have, Your Honor.

Judge: Please read your verdicts.

Jury Foreman: On the fourteen counts of embezzlement, we find Jasper Anson Cunningham not guilty. On the twenty-four counts of intentional fraud and deception of investors, we find the defendant Jasper Anson Cunningham not guilty. On the seven counts of money laundering, we find the defendant Jasper Anson Cunningham not guilty. And finally, on the count of conspiracy to murder Laura Cunningham, we find the defendant Jasper Anson Cunningham not guilty.

There is uproar in the courtroom. Judge Hartford banged his gavel. Prosecutor Wynn held his head in shock.

Judge: (*The judge was disappointed.*) Quiet down. Silence in the courtroom. Jasper Cunningham, you are hereby free to go.

Reporters raced over to interview Jasper and took pictures of Jasper as he poised himself to provide remarks.

Jasper: My only comments are as follows: I have wasted nearly a year of my life as the result of an overly zealous prosecutor and a vindictive corrupt legal system. They wanted to bring me down, but they have not. I would like to proceed with my life, raise my son, who has spent his first year of life without his mother and father, and put this horrific trial behind me.

Reporters: What about the accusations you made about Antonio Ignacio during the trial? Did you witness the murder of his father and others? What can you tell us?

Jasper: I will leave that to your justice system to determine whether or not to issue indictments. No further comments.

Au Revoir

Upon arriving at his house, Jasper walked over to the family room, drew the drapes to allow the sun to pierce through, and opened the windows for the fresh, crisp air to enter. He had not been inside his home since Laura's wake nearly one year ago. While he was in jail, he had not maintained the housekeepers, and the house smelled musty since the windows were closed during his time away.

Jasper desperately longed to release the aggravation and tension the trial had brought on. Greatly craving a drink, Jasper went over to his bar and took out a bottle of special reserve cognac and a crystal glass that had a thin layer of dust. Jasper rinsed off the glass in his bar sink and poured the cognac. After smelling the aroma, he sipped his first taste like he had no other before. He released a sigh filled with exhaustion and anguish from the emotional cyclone he had ridden.

As he continued to sip his cognac, Jasper looked around his house painfully absorbing the emptiness of his home, the bareness of his life. No one was there to escort him from jail. No one had cared about his existence anymore. The accomplishments he strived to acquire his entire life—power, money, solid family, successful business, and choices of women—were all gone. Jasper reflected on the relationships in his life. No one will have the same interaction with him as he formerly knew. Laura was gone. He halfheartedly blamed himself for her tragic demise. His relationship with Tracey was shattered. He hated what he had done to Tracey in the courtroom, but it was necessary in order to secure his own freedom. Phil's business partnership was irreparable. Continued association with Jasper, even if exonerated, would taint Phil's ethical and trustworthy reputation that his legal empire was built on, and it could not be comprised—not even tarnished. But Jasper was unclear why Phil had not spoken with him regarding the circumstances. Phil deserted Jasper during the most crucial point of his life. Had Phil known about Samantha, her linkage to Antonio Ignacio, and her intent to sabotage Jasper? Did Phil have any responsibility? These were all very unclear to Jasper. He wanted to speak with Phil. He swallowed down a second glass of cognac and called Phil.

“Good afternoon, Edwards, Edwards & Cloise, Phillip Cloise’s office. May I help you?”

Jasper did not recognize the voice. He concluded Phil had a new assistant.

“Yes, is he in?”

“May I ask who is calling please?”

“Jasper Cunningham.”

“Hold on, Mr. Cunningham.” After about fifteen seconds, the receptionist returned to the line. “I’m sorry, Mr. Cunningham, but Mr. Cloise is in a meeting. May I take a message?” Jasper pondered whether or not to press her, but he knew it would be to no avail. Phil already severed the ties. Why would Phil care to speak with him now?

“Yes, please give him a message.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Tell him . . . I understand why.”

“Excuse me, sir?”

“Tell him Jasper Cunningham understands why he took the actions that he did.”

“I sure will. Have a good day, sir.” And they hung up.

Although Jasper was insulted that Phil didn’t take his call, he couldn’t expect anything else. His mentor, business partner, and friend was no longer any of those things in his life.

It was now time to secure his son. Magnus was living with Laura’s parents in Washington, D.C.

“Hello, Mark, it’s Jasper. I am calling to make arrangements to bring Magnus home.”

“Magnus is at home,” responded Mark over the phone.

“Magnus is not home. He needs to be with me. I am his father.”

“I am his grandfather. I am the man who will raise Laura’s son into being the man you could never ever be. And if you come here, I’ll tell you the same.”

“Listen, Mark, I am not getting on a plane to DC to fight with you. These are the terms dictated by the custody agreement. I am calling the necessary authorities, and they will escort my son back to New York. Make sure you comply.”

“You irresponsible crook. You would allow Magnus to travel to NY in the care of total strangers just to make your worthless life easier?”

“Listen closely, Mark. You did not stand by me during this TRYING time all of these months. I spent nearly a year of my life in jail!” Jasper shouted on the phone. “You accused me the entire time. You scorned me. You made everyone—our family, friends, even the goddamn press—believe that I was responsible for the death of your daughter and that I was corrupt. Well, I lost my firm, Mark. My partners are dead. My contacts have written me off, and my clientele have secured other firms. AND I DON’T HAVE A GODDAMN DIME TO MY NAME FAR LESS THE MILLIONS YOU AND YOUR LEGAL CRONIES HAVE ACCUSED ME OF EMBEZZLING, LAUNDERING, AND CHEATING PEOPLE OUT OF! I was found innocent of all those charges. But what the fuck did you do? What the fuck did you do? A jury has spoken goddammit. I am innocent.” Jasper bitterly continued. “I never should have been in that cage for all this time. You and your justice system, your corrupt judge and DA friends, your little leaks to the newspapers all made it an uphill battle for me. But under the legal system that YOU enforced, that YOU lived for, I was acquitted—”

“How dare you make those accusations!”

“Judge Brockton,” Jasper said mockingly, “you and your justice system can go to hell. You will never see my son again. Say your last grandpa good-byes. Take your last stroll in the park or watch your last baseball game or whatever the fuck you grandfathers do. But my son will not be exposed to your bullshit! You bourgeois bastard! You think you’re better than I am? I grew up facing far more challenges than you experienced, and I accumulated my fortunes and built my empire through my own efforts.

There were no doors opened for me by prior ancestry or daddy's buddies. I had to conquer my own. I earned my fortunes through my wisdom, my efforts, and motivation to be successful in this life. You should be damn glad that I am not coming to DC because I would not contain myself. I would likely end up on assault charges that WOULD be justified." Jasper recomposed himself and said matter-of-factly, "Listen, the authorities will be there in the morning to pick up my son. Have his things ready for transport." Jasper hung up the phone.

It was time to start a new life in a new country. His life in the United States was over. He called his travel agent to confirm reservations for Magnus and him to fly to Madrid, Spain. The one-way tickets were confirmed on Air Spana to leave in two nights.

Jasper's first few hours home were emotionally draining and depressing. He poured a third glass of cognac and slowly proceeded upstairs to his master bedroom to pack his necessary belongings. He had planned to take only a few articles of clothing and several memorable items. Laura's family had previously gone through the house and taken all of their cherished memories of Laura. Interestingly enough, he noticed his in-laws had left the wedding photo album tossed in a wastepaper basket in his bedroom. Disgusted by their lack of concern, he reached for the album and flipped through the photos only to place it back into the garbage without removing any of the pictures. The phone rang.

"Hello."

"Yes, Mr. Cunningham? This is Green Tower Reality Company. How are you today?"

"Fine. What time will you arrive for the keys tomorrow?"

"That's why we are calling, sir. We will stop by around 4:00 pm. We wanted to confirm that you are selling the house as is and that any items left in the home, clothing, furniture, etc., are still included."

"How many times do I have to go over this? Yes, that is correct. And what about the lake house? What's happening with the property?"

“We’ve already secured a buyer. The closing is scheduled in ten business days.”

“I will have a power of attorney for the closing. Mail my check to the post office box I left with your real estate brokers. My power of attorney will also handle the same when the primary residence is sold.”

“Thank you, sir. Is there anything else we at Green Tower Realty Company can do to enable your real estate needs?”

“I appreciate it. Take care.”

He hung up the phone and stared at the receiver as he gulped his third drink. An impulse ran through his body as he thought about calling Tracey to apologize to her for everything he had put her through and allow her to understand that she helped him tremendously. He picked up the phone and dialed. The call immediately went to an operator message indicating the line had been disconnected with no further information. He stared at the phone disappointed and hung up.

Somewhat inebriated, Jasper fell to his knees and began to sob. “What happened? Everything is destroyed! I worked so hard . . . only for this.” He wept loudly. For the first time since Jasper’s arrest, he released the anguish and pain that he experienced. He sobbed uncontrollably and eventually fell asleep on the bedroom floor.

The following afternoon, the child welfare bureau arrived at Jasper’s home with Magnus in arms. The social worker handed Magnus over to Jasper whose eyes lit up when he saw his baby boy. Hugging Magnus with relief and hope, Jasper concluded he was a big baby for eleven months and resembled Jasper.

Laura’s parents were in a car at the curbside looking on. Mrs. Brockton was visibly crying, blowing her nose, and wiping her eyes with a tissue while Mark Brockton’s face revealed a deep-rooted hatred that could bring fear to an onlooker. Jasper signed a release paper that was presented to him, and the social worker left in a navy blue car; but surprisingly, the Brocktons remained parked outside. Puzzled, Jasper briefly watched his in-laws and then closed the front door.

The Brocktons sat outside in their car the entire afternoon raising Jasper's level of concern. Jasper debated whether or not his in-laws were planning something unsavory, so he periodically watched them through his window blinds. After three hours, they finally drove away. But Jasper was uncomfortable about what may happen before he and Magnus left the country. Shortly thereafter, Jasper called a taxicab to take them to a hotel at the airport. He chose not to spend his last night in the United States at his house for concern over something ruining his plans. The following evening, Jasper boarded an Air Spana jet with his son in his arms.

"Wave bye-bye to the U.S., Magnus," said Jasper.

Seven and a half hours later, they arrived in Madrid. A private car awaited at the airport and drove them to the mountainous village of Sierra de Gredos just west of Madrid. The scantily populated village was surrounded by mountains, waterfalls, and lagoons with lots of fresh air and space. The car pulled up to a sprawling luxury stone villa on thirty acres of green mountainous land. Jasper had the taxi driver carry his luggage, and he held Magnus in his arms.

A five feet ten inches tall slender woman with a bright smile came out of the home. She wore white capri pants, a yellow halter top revealing a flat firm stomach with a pierced navel, and sparkling gold sandals with beautifully manicured toes. She had a powerful presence with a body of a high-fashion model.

"Buenos dias, mi amor," she said as she approached Jasper.

"Buenos dias, Heather." They hugged and kissed a long loving kiss on the lips.

"Oh, I missed you so much," said Heather.

"I missed you too," replied Jasper.

"And is this Magnus?" Heather asked.

"Yes, it is indeed."

"Magnus, give me a big hug." Heather took Magnus in her arms.
"Magnus, come meet your sister, Victoria, in the garden in the back."

Jasper walked around the front of the home alone for a minute and took in the fresh mountain air and the view from his new home. Heather had contacted Jasper in 2002, a year after giving birth to their daughter, Victoria. She had explained that she decided against returning to the United States out of embarrassment. She wanted to keep their baby but could not face Phil or the social humiliation the circumstances would draw. Her father had passed away, and her mother had a stroke shortly thereafter. She needed time and space. Heather secretly called Claire from time to time to find out how Kyle and Kevin were doing but did not let Phil know her whereabouts either. After the initial contact, Jasper had met Heather and Victoria a couple of times in Europe before his arrest. It was Heather and Victoria that Eva testified to have seen with Jasper in Versailles a year prior to Laura's death.

He breathed a deep sigh and finally felt a sense of relief. No one in the United States had known about Heather's location. Here, he would have peace and anonymity and could be with the only woman he had ever truly loved and raise his two children. No more corruption, deception, and fear for his life. He stepped on the stone pavers to the back of the luxury villa to join his new family. He stopped before he completely approached and watched his children play from a distance. Jasper was content that they were finally all unified in love.

Heather smiled at Jasper as she approached him with Victoria in her arms. Jasper embraced his daughter tightly. Victoria was caramel-colored with light brown curly hair and hazel eyes. Like Magnus, she too resembled Jasper. A tear came to his eyes as he stared at Victoria and kissed her forehead. He thought how extraordinary it is that within one week he was reunited with his two children. Nothing could take him away from them ever again.

"Hello, Victoria," said Jasper. "Do you remember me? *Yo soy padre. Te quiero.* I love you." Jasper kissed his daughter's cheek, hugged her again, and returned Victoria to Heather. Heather signaled for the nanny who was holding Magnus in her arms.

"Jasper, this is Martha. She will be the children's nanny," said Heather.

“Hello, Martha.”

“*Buenos dias*, Señor Cunningham. I have been looking forward to having Magnus with us. He is such a handsome boy. This home is now complete *con padre y hijo*.”

“Gracias, Señora,” replied Jasper.

Martha took the children away. Jasper and Heather held hands and strolled around the orchid and lily gardens to catch up.

“The trial was difficult,” said Jasper.

“I wish I could have been there for you. I always knew you would be acquitted.”

“I’m glad you were not there. It was filled with hate, treachery, and is a dark part of my life that I am striving to put out of my mind. Thank God you were not part of that experience, Heather. You and the children are a fresh new beginning . . . the purest parts of my life.” He hugged and kissed her.

“Have you spoken with Phil since the acquittal?”

“No. He wouldn’t accept my call.”

“He still doesn’t know whether I’m dead or alive.”

“I think it’s in everyone’s best interest to keep it that way,” replied Jasper.

“It’s been two years since I’ve seen or spoken with Kyle and Kevin. I don’t know how much longer I can continue to do this.”

“Now that I am free, we’ll jointly figure out a way for us to get the twins.”

That evening, Heather and Jasper had showered and were in their master bedroom suite preparing for their first night together in over one year.

Jasper embraced Heather. He kissed her deeply. He held her face between his hands and kissed her hard. Jasper had missed Heather’s love.

“¿Me quieres? ¿Me amas?” asked Heather.

“Of course, I love you.” Jasper kissed her deeply to allay her concerns. He wanted to reveal the truth to her in order to begin the life he sought together.

“Heather, I am a very rich man. I have nearly \$700 million in an account in El Bank de Spana in Barcelona. This money is for us . . . you and the children.”

But Heather was unmoved by his statement. “Your money is irrelevant. I have my own. When my father died, he left my brother and me just over a billion dollars to share equally.”

Jasper was surprised as he had never known Heather’s family was wealthy. He was even more comfortable trusting Heather since he knew she was not with him for financial gain.

“*Mi amor*, I missed you so much. I hated being without you in these early years of Victoria’s life. Reading the newspapers and hearing the lies they reported about you on television was unbearable. Come to me, my love.”

Jasper lifted Heather and carried her to the chaise near the floor-to-ceiling triple windows in their bedroom. Her breasts peaked through her cream-colored silk camisole, and he fondled them as he licked her neck. He playfully exposed her big brown nipples and covered them back. His fingers stroked her smooth and flawless thighs. He turned Heather around to observe her buttocks in the cream-colored silk thong. The manifested desire for over a year could not be contained as he nibbled, kissed, and squeezed her cheeks. Heather moaned with pleasure. Jasper loved her more than he had ever before.

“¡Te adoro apasionadamente!” she shrieked.

“I adore you too, Heather.”

A warm breeze blew the curtains. Heather’s hair slightly blew back as she faced the windows. The night sky, bright stars, and crescent moon piercing through reflected shadows of her beauty.

Staring into her eyes, Jasper said, “Marry me, Heather.”

“Of course, Jasper. *Mi amor*. Yes, I will marry you.”

Heather jumped into Jasper’s arms with both of her legs wrapped around him. He spun her around in a 360-degree circle, and they fell onto their bed giggling.

That night they made feverish love. Jasper greatly craved being inside of Heather’s warm wet body. He passionately wanted her, and Heather became uncontrollable as he eased inside of her. He gently made love to his fiancée as he held her tightly. She grabbed his shoulders with all her strength and pushed herself to allow his love to be deep within. Jasper loved her sexual aggression and surrendered to Heather’s sexual control. She dug her fingernails in his skin as they rapidly pulsed with intense force. Rolling on top of Jasper, she straddled over him facing his feet as he lay flat on his back, and she eased down on him. She directed a fast pace as she stretched and grabbed his legs. Jasper rubbed her buttocks, spanking her gently as she made love to him. He continued to lay flat on his back as she turned around to face him. Heather grabbed his biceps, bent her knees with her feet flat on the bed, and thrust down on Jasper rocking him back and forth inside of her. She squeezed his arms with all of her force and drove his firm long width throughout her body. Her rhythmic motion was fast with youthful energy and zeal. Jasper was about to reach orgasm, but she slowed down to stop him. She eased up and teasingly looked at him. She put Jasper inside of her mouth and very slowly licked her wetness off Jasper. Jasper groaned, and she got back on top feeling him even larger than before inside of her. He lifted his back off the bed to hold her closely as they continued to make forceful love moaning in ecstasy. Embracing each other face-to-face while sitting on the bed, Heather and Jasper sucked each other’s tongues and lips and tightly hugged as they simultaneously released their passion with warmth teeming from their inner bodies. Jasper had resolved that Heather was meant to be his mate for the rest of his life.

For the next two months, Jasper and Heather sailed in one of her yachts on the Mediterranean Sea with the children and Martha. They docked in Monaco for a week and got married.

Six months after their wedding, Heather was anxious to attend the fashion house events in Paris. She had not been on the fashion circuit in years since leaving Phil and was anxious to socialize again. She felt her lifestyle had now become too sedentary. However, unlike his outgoing personality before the trial, Jasper became reserved and focused on his family. Since the trial, Jasper refrained from public events, but this time he wanted to make his wife happy. From Heather's perspective, it was intended to be a high-profile trip.

They left the children in Spain and flew to Paris in the late fall. The spring fashion season was showing at the major fashion houses—Chanel, Gucci, Armani, to name a few. On the evening of their arrival, Jasper and Heather enjoyed dinner at Heather's favorite French restaurant Le Poisson two blocks away from the Louvre Museum.

After dinner, they entered the house of Armani. The showing was crowded, and Heather attempted to mingle with all those she wanted to rekindle her relationship. They had excellent seats in the second row off the runway stage.

When seated, Jasper spotted a familiar face seated across the runway. It was Solae Ngane-Santos. Of course she would be there, he thought. He noticed how she had appeared to have aged and was not as striking as he had remembered. She wore a charcoal wool plain dress with a huge wide patent belt. She sat with her legs crossed and showed off her long legs with her arched feet in a peek-toe patent leather shoe. Her hair was longer and pulled back in a slick bun. She had gained weight and lost her sexual, sensual quality. The seat next to her was empty. He wondered whether or not it was for Ramone. He attempted to catch Solae's eye before the show began but could not. About two-thirds the way through the show, their eyes finally locked. He wanted to acknowledge her, but he knew she had deeply hated him. They stared at each other for seconds that seemed like hours and did not send any gestures. The seat next to her remained empty for the entire show.

Heather was keen on attending the after party that followed; however, Jasper was reluctant. He told her to go without him, and he walked back to the hotel alone.

The party was crowded with over seven hundred guests drinking, exchanging phone numbers, and negotiating fashion deals. Heather was speaking with two fashion producers when an unfamiliar face interjected.

“Hello, ladies. I’d like to introduce myself. I’m Solae Ngane-Santos.” Solae extended her hand to each of the three financiers.

“Hello, Solae. I’m Francine Valencia. I’ve attended one or two of your shows in the past,” she said skeptically.

“I’m Jacqueline De Shaw,” she said curtly.

“Heather Cunningham.”

“It’s a pleasure,” Solae responded. “I’m in negotiations with potential sponsors for next season’s showing.”

Francine and Jacqueline did not appreciate Solae’s intrusion. They were aware of Solae’s objective and her reputation. Solae was unable to secure investors for her recent shows since her testimony at Jasper’s trial. Advertisers, publicists, and designers did not want to work with Solae. Jacqueline and Francine turned away from Solae and started to speak directly to one another. Solae hung on to Heather who was unaware of Solae’s past and her role in Jasper’s trial.

Commenting on Heather’s perfect physique, Solae asked, “Are you a fashion model?”

Heather chuckled, recognizing Solae’s weak attempt at flattery. “Thank you for the question, however, I am far from being a model. I’ve always enjoyed attending the shows since I was a teenager in Greece.”

“Greece? Is that your native country?”

“Well, sort of. My father is Greek, but my mother is Ethiopian. We lived in various European and African countries over the years.”

“I see. Are you scouting new talent?”

“Not at the moment. This is just for enjoyment. I’ve been home with my children for a couple of years now.”

“How many children do you have?” Solae cordially asked.

“Two, a girl and a boy.”

“How lovely.”

“My husband, Jasper, and I are enjoying a first opportunity in nearly a year to see the season fashion opening.”

Solae’s pulse started to beat rapidly. Could it be Jasper’s wife? It must be, recalling that Heather said her last name was Cunningham and that she saw Jasper at the show.

“Jasper? Are you married to Jasper Cunningham?”

Heather pulled back. “Do you know my husband?”

Solae was unprepared to reply. “Well, I thought I might have seen him in the house of Armani.”

“Yes, you could have seen him there. We watched the show together. How do you know Jasper?”

“I met him years ago at a fund-raiser in New York. Is he here?” Solae was concerned Jasper may join Heather.

“No, he went back to our hotel room. He’s not well this evening.” Solae was more comfortable.

“Oh, I’m sorry to hear.”

“Where are you from?”

“We live in New York. How about you?”

Unaccustomed to hiding their whereabouts, Heather freely spoke, “We live in Spain.”

“Which city?”

“Sierra de Gredos. Right outside of Madrid.” Heather caught herself being too open and wanted to change the subject.

“So, tell me about your business. You said you were seeking sponsors?”

“Yes, that’s right.” Solae had mixed excitement in her voice. “I have a designer, Xavier, who is new to the industry. He specializes in women’s

cocktail dresses with designs that include fur . . . mostly mink.”

“Aahh, winter dresses.”

“Yes. As a matter of fact, I would like to have a breakthrough show in Moscow.”

“Moscow?” Heather asked perplexed.

“It’s an emerging market . . . untapped . . . with new money to spend.”

“I disagree.”

“Why? Ever since perestroika, there are pockets of wealthy Russians looking for ways to spend—”

Heather interrupted, “Their ill-gotten gains.”

“Excuse me?”

“You are targeting a corrupt market.”

“I’ve done my research and—”

Heather interrupted again, “Look, Solae, I’m not sure what research you’ve done, but the only ones who benefited from the changes in the Soviet Union were folks who were backed by the strong arm. I, for one, as a potential investor, would not be interested in placing my money in a Russian-based project.”

Solae was insulted and defensively replied, “I was not seeking your investment.”

“Well, I suppose you have not done your research then.”

“How dare you!” exclaimed Solae.

“My dear, from what I can see, this industry is beyond your level of expertise.”

“You have the audacity to insult my venture, assume that I was soliciting sponsorship from you, and insult my business capability?”

“I certainly did not intend any of that. I was attempting to provide some educated advice.”

“Why would I want your advice? You of all people have the nerve to point fingers at corruption.”

“I beg your pardon?” asked Heather.

“That’s right! Don’t think for a minute that I would want Jasper Cunningham’s dirty money. You want to identify ill-gotten gains, look at your own bank account!”

Heather realized Solae knew about Jasper.

“You conniving bitch! Did you set me up? Did you come over here to pry about me personally? Who are you?” asked Heather.

“I had no idea who you were. But you sure told me, didn’t you?”

“Get out of here, you piece of shit!” exclaimed Heather.

“I’ve had enough of being in the presence of sleaze anyway.” Solae walked away from Heather.

* * *

Three months later, Ramone pulled up to the law offices of Edwards, Edwards & Cloise in New York. He had spent the past year and a half anxiously awaiting this day to confront Phil with alarming information that affected the lives of many.

Ramone entered the high-rise building and got off the elevator on the thirty-fifth floor. A receptionist greeted him.

“Good morning, sir. May I help you?”

“Yes, I have an appointment to see Phillip Cloise.”

“Your name please?”

“Ramone Santos.”

“Mr. Santos, please have a seat, and I’ll let him know you’re here.”

“Thank you.”

A few moments later, Phil’s assistant entered the reception area.

“Mr. Santos?”

Ramone jumped out of his seat. "Yes, indeed."

"Please follow me."

Ramone walked the regal corporate legal offices and arrived at Phil's office door. At first he didn't recognize Phil as he had not seen Phil in several years. Phil had lost over twenty pounds and appeared frail. Phil thought Ramone was there to seek legal representation.

"Ramone Santos, how are you?" asked Phil.

"Phil, I'm well." Phil was surprised by Ramone's familiar tone. "Do you recall meeting me several years ago at the International Fund of Lawyers for the Underserved banquet?"

"I'm afraid I don't. But don't be offended. I meet hundreds of people in a year at multiple events," Phil replied.

The men sat down, and Phil asked, "What legal matters can I help you with today?"

"Well, I'm not here in a legal capacity. It's regarding Jasper Cunningham." Phil's demeanor quickly changed and became somber. He stood up from his chair.

"Listen, Mr. Santos, I don't have any interests in Jasper Cunningham. Please leave my office."

"Before you jump to conclusions, hear me out."

"I don't want to hear you at all. Who are you, a reporter? Are you writing a rag sheet?" Phil walked over to his telephone intercom and pressed the button.

Phil's assistant responded, "Yes, Mr. Cloise." Ramone interrupted before Phil went any further.

"It involves your wife, Heather." Phil released the intercom button and looked at Ramone with skepticism.

"What do you know about my wife?"

"I know your wife left you in New York several years ago, and she hasn't been back to the U.S. since."

“Why is my wife of concern to you?”

“I’m getting there. If you would allow me to explain.”

“Get there fast.”

“May I sit?”

“Go ahead.”

“I watched Jasper in that courtroom for months. I loathed him then, and I continue to feel the same way. He sexually assaulted Solae, my wife. He wanted to ridicule me. He made an absolute mockery of her and ruined our lives fabricating to the world that she was a businessman’s prostitute. Jasper made her appear to be using her body for men like him to invest in her endeavors. It was all over the fashion pages in NY, Europe, and Asia for weeks. She was not represented as the true victim but as a cheap whore that could be bought by any wealthy man with a checkbook and a sexual drive. Solae was ashamed to attend any events for months. This is her livelihood. It’s not even financial. Fashion drives her life. He ruined much of what she could have done in her field. You cannot fathom the difficulties we both faced as a result of the testimony that he twisted from a truth to a lie. You know the saying ‘A lie can be halfway around the world before the truth has its boots on.’”

“This was all in the newspapers, Mr. Santos. I am fully aware.” Phil was closely familiar with Jasper’s trial proceedings. Although Phil did not attend the trial, he studied the transcript for weeks following Jasper’s acquittal; however, he did not want Ramone to be aware of his level of interest.

Ramone continued, “I learned all about the murders. It took a while, but I eventually figured out that Jasper had his business partners Mark Waddell and Jonathan Gates murdered. You see, he was concerned that they would plead guilty and testify against him on the embezzlement and fraud charges. Waddell and Gates wanted to isolate themselves from Jasper and bring forth evidence—e-mails, canceled checks, bills—which would have implicated Jasper. The families of Waddell and Gates were afraid to speak with the FBI because of the anonymous threats they received in the middle of the night. Waddell went as far as writing a note to his wife while he was in prison for

fear that something would happen to him. She knew where to locate evidence.”

Phil listened intently to Ramone’s accusations then asked, “Then why hadn’t she brought this evidence out during Jasper’s trial?”

“Are you listening to me? These families were threatened by Jasper’s underworld connections. You know why. They would have been killed just the same.”

“Why do you care?” asked Phil. “For that matter, why would you think I would care? And once again, how does this relate to my wife?”

“There’s more. Tracey Bodden came to see me a few months after the trial was over.” Phil expressed an increased level of interest. “Tracey explained that she was unable to understand how the men who raped and assaulted her were able to enter her apartment without breaking any locks or doors. It became clear a few months after the trial when the maintenance worker in her building found a beige leather key case behind the back staircase. After asking the residents, the worker learned the wallet didn’t belong to any of the owners in the building, so he left it with the lost and found. Tracey’s neighbor Ellen had visited the lost and found hoping her dog’s favorite rubber biscuit was there. Lo and behold, she spotted the key case that she and Tracey shopped for in Saks Fifth Avenue engraved with the initials JAC as a gift to guess who? She told Tracey about the key case, and Tracey went to claim the key case she had given Jasper with her apartment keys inside the Valentine’s Day prior to his arrest. Tracey then realized that Jasper was involved in her rape and brutal beating. He gave those men her keys and led them to her.”

Phil was mortified to hear what Ramone had discovered; however, he was waiting to hear the connection to Heather.

“This is all very troublesome. It is unfortunate that this was not discovered prior to or during the trial, Mr. Santos.”

“I have more to say. I know where Jasper Cunningham is residing.”

“I really don’t care, Mr. Santos. Why would you think that it would concern me?”

“Jasper is living right outside of Madrid. Ironically, he is married to your wife, Heather.”

Phil became numb. Ramone realized he finally struck the chord he was looking to ignite.

Ramone continued, “Jasper is playing house with Heather. They have a child together. A daughter named Victoria. They’ll be celebrating their first-year wedding anniversary soon.”

Phil’s eyes were inflamed. Ramone recognized this was his opportunity to get Phil’s alignment.

“Where are they living?”

“Jasper and Heather reside in Sierra de Gredos outside of Madrid.”

“How do you know this, Mr. Santos?”

“My wife met Heather in Paris a few months ago.”

Ramone was unsure whether he sufficiently roused Phil.

“Jasper married my wife?” asked Phil.

Ramone replied, “That bastard ruined both of our women . . . our lives. He degraded our women and is now living the lifestyle of a tycoon—a lifestyle that he does not deserve.”

“Tell me again, how did you learn this information?” Although Phil was less distrusting, he was cautious.

“As I said earlier, Heather was socializing in Europe on the fashion circuit and met my wife, Solae. My conscience would not allow me to just sit on this troubling information.”

“How much of any of this have you shared with the authorities?” asked Phil.

“None.”

“Why not? It seems to me you have substantial new evidence that may warrant new charges. No double jeopardy there.”

“I saw our legal system free Jasper once. I have very little faith that he would be indicted this time, far less convicted.”

Recognizing Ramone’s attempt to rouse him, Phil responded, “I am an attorney, Mr. Santos. I work within the legal system.”

“Mr. Cloise, you are a powerful man. I am not asking or expecting anything . . . certainly nothing beyond the boundaries of the law,” Ramone lied. “I merely thought you should be aware.”

Phil stood up. “Is that all, Mr. Santos?”

Ramone was caught off guard by Phil’s abrupt dismissal. Ramone was unsure whether or not he accomplished what he sought so he proposed, “If you need to speak with me further, please let me know.” Ramone extended a business card to Phil.

“Thank you for your inflammatory visit,” Phil sarcastically remarked.

Ramone extended his hand to shake, but Phil did not reciprocate.

* * *

Six months later in Sierra de Gredos, as he approached the entrance of his home, Jasper heard police sirens ringing out down the road. He stopped to view what the unusual commotion entailed when the police cars stopped abruptly in front of his door. Four Spanish uniform policemen scurried out of their cars with clubs and approached Jasper. Two of the police officers grabbed Jasper’s arms behind his back.

“Señor Jasper Cunningham?”

“Si . . . Si . . . ,” he replied in a confused but agreeable manner.

“Usted está bajo arresto.”

“Under arrest? What is the charge?” he asked. They shuffled him into the car.

“You are wanted in the United States for tow counts of second-degree murder.”

“In the United States? Murder?” Jasper did not resist and entered the car.

Heather saw the commotion from her conservatory window and ran outside the house screaming.

“*Que pasa?* What is going on, Señor?” However, the policemen ignored her. She became frantic and banged on the police car window as the car sped away.

Upon arrival at the jail, Jasper continued to ask, Where are the U.S. authorities? To whom did he conspire to murder? Jasper knew he could not be retried for the conspiracy to murder charge. The Spanish authorities refused to provide details and stated he would be brought before the judge within one week.

Jasper was brought to a dirty dark cell without windows. He sat on the bench that was used as a bed. He repeatedly requested to call Heather, but they refused once again, indicating he would be brought before the judge within one week.

The scenario appeared too mysterious and unusual for Jasper to absorb. One week? How did the U.S. officials know he was living in this remote village in Spain? Where were the U.S. authorities and why were they looking for him now? As he sat in the dingy cell, he experienced flashbacks of his prior arrest and the confinement it imposed. An overwhelming fear that this arrest would present a similar, if not worse, challenge with an unfavorable outcome overcame Jasper. He had so much more to lose now. His life was stable. He was free from the Ignacios. He had a true family for the first time ever.

After two hours had passed, Jasper heard the metal door down the hall open and shut. He barely heard several men softly speaking in Spanish. The metal door opened again and slammed. He heard the footsteps of one person coming down the hall toward his cell. The footsteps were slow yet determined. Jasper was uneasy. The dimly lit lightbulb in his cell barely shone enough light for him to see his feet. The person stopped at his cell door and used a key to open the thick metal door. Jasper could not believe his eyes.

“Jasper.”

“Phil?” Jasper jumped up pleased to see his longtime partner who he hadn’t seen in years. “Phil, what is going on? Did Heather call you to defend me?”

Phil was silent.

“What are you doing here? Never mind, I am so glad you are here. Did you fly in from the States? Were you in Europe?”

Phil remained deafeningly silent. He had hatred and despise expressed on his face. Jasper withdrew. Phil’s countenance was not welcoming but instead reticent. Jasper realized that he had concluded incorrectly. Phil was not there to assist him.

Jasper continued, “Are you responsible for all this?”

“I have no such ability.”

“Phil, I’m asking you. Are you responsible for my being imprisoned tonight?”

“YOU are responsible for being in this place. Not me.”

“Why? How did you convince these police to arrest me . . . for murder?”

“I saw you with a woman. The two of you looked quite happy. I dare say in love. Lo and behold I see that it is Heather. Mr. and Mrs. Jasper Cunningham,” Phil said with sarcasm and envy. “You appeared to be a new man, Jasper, less fire in your eyes but far more content. I dare say happy. I had that once . . . when I married Heather and we had my twin boys. She and I shared a bond . . . until you destroyed our union.”

Jasper knew he had many enemies, but he thought Phil had surrendered to the loss of Heather. He underestimated the extent Phil would go for revenge. Jasper did not believe Phil would be the one who would continue to pursue him so aggressively.

“Is there a warrant out for my arrest in the U.S.?”

Phil ignored Jasper's question. "You just couldn't resist, could you? But what you failed to realize, Jasper, is there isn't any Mr. and Mrs. Jasper Cunningham. Heather and I never divorced."

"Phil, don't ignore me. Is there a warrant out for my arrest in the U.S.?"

"There should have been, you polygamous son of a bitch."

"WHAT THE HELL? You mean to tell me this arrest is bogus?" Jasper was infuriated.

Phil remained factual. "Not at all. You are a murderous, thieving, polygamous bastard."

"WHAT the fuck do you want with me, Phil?" Jasper shouted.

"I want my family back."

"You want to ruin my life because of a woman? Are you fucking crazy?"

"Jasper, she never would have left if she wasn't carrying your bastard baby." Jasper could no longer contain his anger. He swung his fist at Phil's jaw. The punch landed, and Phil fell back. Phil was no match for Jasper. Jasper pushed him against the wall and held him pinned against the wall.

"YOU GET ME OUT OF THIS HELL HOLE NOW! MY LIFE IS NOT A CHESS MATCH FOR YOU TO PLAY."

"LET GO OF ME, JASPER! I'M NOT YOUR FUCKING PUNCHING BAG OR I WILL MAKE SURE YOU STAY IN THIS PIT FOR THE REST OF YOUR BORN DAYS. GET OFF ME NOW!"

Jasper shook Phil loose. The two men backed off each other to calm down. They paused for what seemed like hours but actually only minutes. Jasper took a deep breath. He knew Phil came there with an objective and knew this would not solve anything. Jasper sat on the bed.

"How did you find us?"

"You can thank your buddy Ramone Santos for doing the legwork. He investigated you after your trial was over . . . followed your every move. He

uncovered you, Jasper. In many more ways than you perhaps could have predicted.”

“Ramone? That prick has been a thorn in my life for many years. He’s a liar, Phil.” Jasper held his head in disbelief recalling the years in which Ramone was always present, seemingly lurking in the background sending others to do his work—Solae, now Phil. He recollected the extent in which Ramone went to discredit him with reporters during his trial and other times. Jasper underestimated Ramone’s continued disdain for him.

“Hell . . . It began when he and I were climbing the social ladder making names for ourselves. I watched that son of a bitch plateau many years ago when I continued to soar. He persistently singled me out. He’s a liar, Phil! That jealous non-achiever is a liar. You can’t believe him, Phil! He took the easy way out for everything. He gave me a difficult time whenever he found it opportune. He talked to reporters during my trial and instigated inflammatory stories about me. He uses people, Phil.” Jasper looked at Phil and sarcastically asked, “Are you his puppet now?”

“You’ve lost your mind.”

“Phil, you called the authorities on me under false charges, carting me away in embarrassment. In front of my family? my children? my wife? Have YOU lost your mind?”

“YOUR family? You son of a bitch! You stole my wife. You ripped MY family apart.”

“YOU asked for the divorce. She left you with her two kids! And what is this you are talking about polygamy? Heather is my wife.”

“You see, that’s where you are wrong, Jasper. Get your facts straight. She is my wife. There was never a divorce. I never would have freed her to be with you.”

There is silence in the room for a while. Jasper was in disbelief. Heather had never told Jasper.

Phil continued, “But there is much more to discuss. Who was responsible for the murders of Gates and Waddell?”

“How would I know? I was imprisoned . . . waiting to be tried.”

“Be a man for once, Jasper. Admit to the murders.”

“You’re being foolish, Phil. You’ve definitely lost your mind.”

“Don’t belittle me. Don’t sit here playing like you are an altar boy when you are as sinister as they come. You swindled your own partners. Just like you attempted to swindle me.”

“Swindle? Where the fuck were you when I was on trial? You said you would represent me! YOU DESERTED ME PHIL!!”

“Did you have Waddell and Gates murdered?”

Jasper felt challenged by Phil’s questioning to take ownership of his actions.

Phil pressured him, “Were you or were you not responsible for the murders of Waddell and Gates? BE A MAN GODDAMMIT. ADMIT YOUR ACTIONS!”

Jasper yielded, “YES, I HAD THEM MURDERED! THEY BOTH WERE COWARDS! They could never have the impetus to fight for what they had worked for all those years. They would have pulled me down like you’re trying to do now!” There was a long pause.

“Why did you have them killed?” asked Phil.

Jasper’s eyes were wide open. “I loathe weakness, Phil.”

Phil digested Jasper’s response and moved on to the next matter conducting the encounter like a trial. “And how could you let the Ignacio family savagely destroy that young lady Tracey Bodden?”

Jasper was still reflecting on the murder when he was hit with Phil’s new line of questioning.

“That’s none of your business, Phil. Stay out of it.”

“Answer the question! You are such a big and powerful man. Why did you have that defenseless young woman brutally assaulted?”

Jasper remained silent. He was speechless, unable to utter a word. He looked defeated. He bordered shame, particularly before Phil. He needed to make Phil understand.

Jasper confessed, “I gave Tracey’s house keys to the Ignacio family. My only intent was for them to retrieve the file and to scare her so that she would not go to the authorities. It was not my intent . . . I never reconciled in my mind what I had caused Tracey to undergo. Goddammit, Phil, yes . . . I could be vengeful, but I never wanted anything to happen to her. Tracey had not done anything to deserve that treatment. I hate Antonio Ignacio for the rape and assault.”

“And who do you blame for victimizing her on the witness stand?”

“I was forced to . . . look . . . I could have gone to prison—”

“How far would you go to save your own skin, Jasper? At whose expense?”

Jasper whispered with a broken voice, “How is she? Tracey?”

“How dare you even ask?”

“When last have you seen her?”

“Don’t play like you care. YOU DON’T CARE ABOUT TRACEY OR ANYONE BUT YOU!”

Phil leaned against the wall and looked at Jasper with intense animosity. “I’ve worked in the U.S. judicial system all my life. Like any other profession, there are times when the participants get it wrong.”

“Get off your high horse, Phil. You are just as guilty of the flaws as any other lawyer, judge, and prosecutor out there.”

“You know damn well EVERYTHING . . . EVERYTHING I gained in this life was through my hard-earned efforts. Jasper, I too loathe weakness. But what you define as weakness are integrity, honor, and ethics.”

Jasper was offended by Phil’s condescending interpretation.

Phil continued, “Was it all worth it? How many were killed because of you? How many lives have been emotionally destroyed all because YOU

LOATHE WEAKNESS? because you are greedy for money and power?”

Jasper rubbed his temple hard. Phil continued, “You wanted it all, Jasper . . . even when it belonged to someone else. Have you enjoyed your time with my wife? Did you keep her bed warm at night . . . in the morning? Did you enjoy her taste . . . her smell?”

“Leave Heather out of this. She made her choice, and it wasn’t you, old man.”

Phil was insulted at Jasper’s flippant response. “I brought tremendous wealth your way . . . for an old man . . . you unappreciative louse. And what did you do? You destroyed the home I earnestly built. You helped yourself to my wife!”

Jasper was fuming over Phil’s remarks and retaliated, “Yes, Phil, I have your wife. She loves me. She gave up everything the two of you had just to be with me and our child.”

Phil responded, “Go to hell, you lowlife.”

Jasper rushed Phil onto the wall. He punched Phil in the stomach several times. Phil unsuccessfully fought back. The two men wrestled to the floor in the tiny jail cell. Jasper was clearly more physically dominant. Phil, however, was armed. He pulled out his gun from inside his jacket pocket and let his arm dangle at his side. Phil was comfortable with the weapon. Jasper backed away.

The men stared at each other. Phil was sweating and breathing heavily.

Jasper chuckled, “So you’re going to kill me now?”

“I should shoot you for the ordeal you put my family through. A punk like you,” said Phil.

“THEN SHOOT ME, GODDAMMIT. THIS IS BULLSHIT FROM YOU . . . AND RAMONE . . . AND EVERYONE ELSE WHO HAS BEEN TRYING TO BRING ME DOWN! GO AHEAD . . . BECAUSE IF IT’S NOT YOU, IT WILL BE SOME OTHER MOTHERFUCKER WHO IS JEALOUS OF WHAT I’VE BEEN . . . THEY LOST THE RACE. I

WON . . . IF IT'S NOT YOU TODAY, IT MIGHT BE ANTONIO . . . TOMORROW. SO GO AHEAD. PULL YOUR FUCKING TRIGGER."

"Don't you concern yourself about tomorrow when I'm right here."

Phil raised the gun to Jasper and pointed it at Jasper's chest.

Jasper's confidence that Phil would not shoot him lessened. He looked in Phil's eyes and saw the pain and resentment.

"Phil, I've been paying for all my deeds for the past two years."

"You were acquitted! You've been living better than the king of Spain ever since."

"I have nothing . . . I made millions . . . It's all gone. My reputation ruined. I'm now forced to live in another country—off a woman," he lied. "At least Mark's and Jonathan's families have hefty bank accounts and lofty insurance claims."

"You just don't get it! It's all about money to you? Where is the money you embezzled?"

"What money? There is no money!" Jasper shouted defeated.

"You murderous fucking liar. You see . . . this is why I . . . people . . . hate you. YOU HAVE TO PAY FOR WHAT YOU DID, JASPER! TO MY WIFE . . . TO TRACEY . . . TO THE FAMILIES OF THOSE MEN YOU HAD KILLED!"

"AND WHEN DID YOU BECOME JUDGE AND JURY?"

Phil cocked the gun. Jasper was about to spring on him again. But Phil pulled the trigger hitting Jasper in the chest. Jasper clutched his wound and fell to his knees.

"See, Phil, you are the true murderer. I never killed anyone." Jasper was bleeding to death on his knees, and for a split second, he saw on the wall a flashback—"Son Knee." Did he have a premonition of these events a year prior? That he would be on his knees in a prison cell—powerless.

Phil stood over Jasper and, almost in a daze, raised the gun and shot Jasper again, this time hitting him in his forehead. Jasper fell backward to

the ground dead.

Three Spanish authorities came running down the hall when they heard the gunshots. They opened the cell door and saw Phil still standing over Jasper's lifeless body still aiming the gun at Jasper. Phil was frozen in a state of shock. He thought, what had he done? He never meant to use the gun. Only to scare Jasper into confessing to get Heather back. He certainly was not a murderer.

“¡Deja el arma! Drop the gun!” But Phil's arms felt like one hundred tons. His legs were planted solid in the ground. He was frozen, unable to move. He was oblivious to the police. He continued to aim the gun at Jasper.

The policemen raised their guns and aimed them toward Phil. Again they requested that Phil drop his weapon.

“¡Deja el arma!” they shouted.

Phil was in a daze. Barely coherent to what was happening, Phil slowly turned around toward the police with the gun still in his hands. Phil raised both arms to surrender not cognizant that he had not dropped the gun. Then in a split second, he realized what was happening.

Phil shouted, *“¡Aléjese! Don't shoot!”* But Phil's actions appeared unclear. The policemen each aimed and fired point-blank at Phil. Three bullets hit Phil in the head killing him instantly.

Back at the villa, unaware of the events, Heather called several police stations to locate where Jasper had been taken. She was placed on hold, in some cases, over half an hour. Heather was unsuccessful in four of her calls until finally the fifth police station disclosed Jasper was taken to a jail in Southern Spain fifty miles away at the request of the U.S. authorities. They explained that he attempted to escape from the jail with the help of an accomplice who provided Jasper with a weapon. Both men were killed. Heather screamed at the top of her lungs and sobbed uncontrollably. She fell to her knees and banged the phone receiver onto the ground repeatedly. Martha came running into the living room.

“Señora Heather, what is the matter? Is it Señor Jasper? Did something happen to him?”

“Martha, he’s dead! He’s dead!” she cried. “They killed him. They just couldn’t allow him to be free . . . to be happy. They tracked him down. All the way here, those corrupt bastards sought revenge. They killed my husband . . . they killed my Jasper. ¿Donde? ¿Donde?”

“No . . . Señora . . . no,” said Martha. “*Lo siento mucho*. I am so sorry.” Heather wept on the floor hysterically. Martha left Heather in order to distract the kids who were down the hall in their playroom. She prevented them from seeing or hearing their mother wail over the loss of her love. After twenty minutes, Heather slowly rose from the floor. She shouted for Martha. Martha scurried into Heather’s room. Heather was rummaging through her closet searching for clothes to wear.

“Look after the kids. I’m going to Cordoba to find out what happened to Jasper.”

Martha was adamant. “He was in Cordoba? Señora Heather, I cannot allow you to go Cordoba. It is too dangerous for you to go. You do not know whether the circumstances are even true.”

Heather realized Martha was right. She took several steps away from the closet with her clothes in her hands still on the hangers. Heather fell to her knees weeping, clutching her clothes in her arms.

“Dear god. Oh, Martha, what am I to do? ¿Qué voy a hacer? What am I to do?” she cried.

Three hours later, Heather received a phone call from the Spanish authorities. They informed Heather that they had identified the deceased accomplice who was allegedly assisting Jasper in his escape. His name was Phillip Cloise. Heather bawled loudly as she held the phone.

“No, not Phil. How could this be? Dear god! What happened?” Heather was distraught.

“Señora, do you know this man?” asked Martha.

“Si, it is my ex-husband,” Heather explained.

They asked Heather where she would like both bodies sent. She requested that they send Jasper's and Phil's bodies to the funeral home in her city.

Heather buried both men in the mountains near her property. Heather notified Phil's family but did not disclose the details of the service. Only she, Martha, and the kids grieved. But Heather knew she had to secure Kyle and Kevin.

Phil and Jasper's mysterious deaths, however, were never further investigated. Heather believed the circumstances in which they died were illogical and that the Ignacio family was responsible and may return to her home to harm her and the children. Heather's location was no longer confidential. She asked Martha to gather the kids, and they were to stay together in the pool house until she could arrange for a relocation. Heather secured the gun that Jasper had hidden in their closet for safety. Jasper was always concerned that Antonio Ignacio would track him down for the return of his money, so he taught Heather how to use a gun.

The events were not broadly reported on television or in the newspapers. Ramone Santos was in New York at the time when Solae returned home from France with the news. One of the models flown in from Spain informed Solae of what she had heard but was thought to be a rumor. When Solae arrived home, she shared the story with Ramone. He sat back in his living room chair content and grinned. He knew it was accurate. The results achieved were far better than he could have ever expected. While Phil was an unintended consequence, Heather was now a widow, with four young children to raise, distrusting of men, living in fear of retaliation by the Ignacio family, and, most importantly, extremely wealthy. He planned to become Heather's savior. Running around the world with Solae seeking recognition was no longer desirable or lucrative. He sought the woman, the money, the power, and the lifestyle that he felt he always deserved. And Jasper—his adversary—not only would have enabled him to acquire them all, but would never stop him.

Heather went into hiding for fear that the Ignacio family would seek her out. She moved the family to Crete, Greece. She told no one and remained a recluse. With the assistance of a Greek attorney, Heather successfully

gained custody of her twins from Phil's sister in the United States and flew Kevin and Kyle to Greece to live with her.

A New Beginning?

Nearly a year had passed since Jasper and Phil's deaths, and the solitary lifestyle in Crete became overbearing for Heather. She was raising her children in seclusion, but she yearned to enjoy life. Heather was still a young woman, only forty years old with an abundance of zeal and energy. So Heather began to travel to Paris and Rome on long weekends, selectively choosing the shows and parties she attended. She dressed modestly and oftentimes avoided speaking with associates she knew from years prior. However, Heather attended one show that spun her life into turmoil.

On this particular night on the nearby Greek island of Santorini, a popular Italian designer, Giancarlo, hosted an extravagant birthday gathering for his thirty-five-year-old daughter, Madelyn. The ballroom was on the water's edge of the Mediterranean Sea. Coincidentally, Ramone and Solae attended along with hundreds of other guests from around the world. Unbeknownst to Heather, Ramone and Solae were at the bar getting drinks when Ramone spotted Heather from the other side of the hall. Ramone thought, *At last, Queen Cunningham has surfaced.* Ramone admired Heather's beauty from afar. Heather was stunningly dressed in an emerald cocktail length dress with matching open-toe shoes. He turned to Solae with the two drinks in his hand.

"Solae, I need for you to leave."

"What! Are you crazy? We just arrived. Not to mention, Madelyn and I haven't seen each other in years."

"Solae, you can't ask questions now. Just go."

"No, I'm not leaving!"

"This is important, Solae. We can't debate on this. Just return to the hotel. I will meet you there later."

"Why, Ramone? What's going on?"

"Heather Cunningham is here."

"So what?"

“She knows you. And she knows you are aware of her background.”

“Ramone, this is unfair to me. We traveled all the way here from New York for Madelyn’s party. I can’t leave now. This might be an opportunity for me to meet the right people. To open new doors.”

“Believe me. I’ll make it up to you. In ways beyond your imagination.”

Ramone kissed Solae on the forehead. She angrily left him with the drinks and went over to Madelyn to tell her she was not feeling well and returned to the hotel. Ramone now had an open gateway to approach Heather.

Heather had never met Ramone nor was she aware of his longtime animosity toward Jasper.

“Good evening,” said Ramone.

“Good evening,” Heather replied.

“I’m Ramone.”

“I’m Heather.”

“Heather, it’s a pleasure to meet you this evening.”

“How do you know Madelyn?” asked Heather.

“She’s a good friend.” Wanting to change the subject, he asked, “Would you like to sit?”

“Sure,” Heather replied. She looked at her new acquaintance. He was tall and handsome and did not wear a wedding band. She wanted to learn more about him.

“Judging from your accent, you’re American,” Heather remarked.

“No denying that. I live in New York.”

“What do you do there?”

“I am a real estate investor and developer,” he embellished.

“Are you really? Is it through your own business?”

“Yes, it is. It allows me flexibility to follow my passion.”

“Which is?”

“Charitable work and social outreach.”

“How commendable, Ramone.”

“Why thank you, Heather the Beautiful.” Heather blushed. Ramone continued, “I’m surprised I haven’t run into you before. I am in Greece occasionally.”

“Who said I was?” she replied. They laughed.

“What a laugh. What a smile. Beauty coupled with a sense of humor. It is so refreshing to see a woman with such genuine expressions. Not exactly common, particularly in this circle, Heather.”

“You’re quite a flatterer, Ramone. But please only refer to me as Heather the Beautiful.” They laughed again.

“Judging from your accent, I’d say you were Spanish.”

“Actually not. But I recently lived in Spain for quite a few years.”

“So you don’t anymore?”

“You ask a lot of questions, Ramone.”

“You are pretty mysterious, Heather the Beautiful.”

Heather and Ramone cautiously became acquainted during the evening. They danced, talked, and enjoyed the birthday formalities together. Heather became smitten by Ramone. Late in the evening, Lionel Richie’s song “Hello” played. Heather thought the song was just for them as Lionel sang, “Hello, is it me you’re looking for? I can see it in your eyes. I can see it in your smile. You’re all I ever wanted, and my arms are open wide.” Heather rested her head on Ramone’s chest. He smelled alluring coupled with his muscular prowess helped to increase Heather’s desires. Ramone was becoming fond of Heather as well. She was not the type of woman he anticipated that she would be when he set out his plan. He had thought she would be embittered from her pain and inspired by greed like Jasper. But instead he had met the perfect lady who was welcoming, compassionate, and had captured his sentiments. A second slow song played, and they held each other even tighter.

The affair was almost over, and the guest of honor was thanking folks. She approached Ramone and Heather.

“Heather, you are just as stunning as ever. How are the kids?” They kissed on each cheek.

“They are all well. You have to come to Crete to visit.”

“It’s such a shame we didn’t have a chance to talk more this evening.”

“Nonsense. Tonight was your party night.”

Madelyn looked at Ramone and said, “Ramone, thank you for coming.”

“It was a wonderful affair.”

“I’m sorry Solae wasn’t feeling well and had to leave.” Heather looked confused.

Ramone replied, “Yes, indeed.”

“But I’m glad you stayed and enjoyed the party. It would have been awful flying over here for no reason.”

“It was a tremendous party.”

“Give Solae my best regards.” They kissed on each cheek.

“Happy birthday, Madelyn,” Ramone and Heather said in unison as Madelyn walked away.

“Were you here with someone else tonight?” asked Heather.

“Yes, I was. And before you frown those beautiful brown eyebrows, it was my business partner. We travel together in a business capacity. I manage her shows.”

“You failed to mention that earlier. Why?”

“How much do you want to learn about me on the first night? Everything?” Ramone teasingly asked.

Heather smiled. She was fond of Ramone. The party guests were leaving, and she did not want the night to end.

“What are you doing for the remainder of this evening?” she asked.

“I don’t have any firm plans,” he replied.

“Come to my yacht with me.”

“A beautiful woman like you would invite a man she doesn’t even know to her yacht? Certainly I can’t accept your invitation. I’ll be back in Greece in a month. We can spend more time together then.”

Heather was slightly embarrassed. Ramone was right. However, she felt safe with him. The fact that he even questioned her offer at the risk of her rescinding made her feel more inclined to be with him tonight.

“Please, do come. I don’t live on Santorini, but I have a small yacht here that is hardly used. My attendants can have it ready within an hour.”

“You’re a genuine strong beautiful woman. Qualities that are rare in most. I admire your confidence.”

The two left the ballroom and entered Heather’s limousine. Heather called ahead to the marina to prepare her yacht to sail and to have a staff person there to serve wine and cheese. As they rode in the car, Ramone teasingly kissed Heather’s cheek. She smiled at the purity of his affection.

It was windy when they arrived at the marina to board the yacht that immediately set sail along the Mediterranean Sea. Parting the slightly rough waters, they drank Beaujolais and watched the moon not quite full but shining brightly in the midnight sky. Ramone slowly licked Heather’s lips with his tongue extending down to her neck where he playfully nibbled on her soft skin. Grasping the back of her head, Ramone kissed her hard and passionately. Extremely eager, Heather greatly welcomed Ramone’s affection as she had not made love to a man since Jasper died.

After the bottle of wine had finished, Ramone escorted her to the lower level of the yacht. Heather undressed Ramone until he was completely naked. She sat on the bed and requested that he stand in front of her. Admiring the manliness of his body and savoring the moments preempting their lovemaking, Heather teasingly rubbed her hands down Ramone’s desirable physique for he had a firm, tight stomach and muscular arms that comforted her. Heather kissed his chest covered with fine short hairs and proceeded down the center of his body licking her pathway past his navel.

By now, Ramone was fully erect, and she enveloped him licking and sucking as much as her mouth could engulf. His firmness in her wet mouth increased their anticipation and heated desire. As he lifted one of his legs onto the bed giving Heather farther access to continue her journey, he grabbed the hair on the back of her head moaning with pleasure. Her tongue swirled around him ever so teasingly, and her mouth increased pace providing him forceful joy. The sea was rougher, so he embraced Heather's shoulders as she held his tight buttocks to maintain his positioning. She gently applied pressure and released, playing with him as she licked and sucked every inch of his body. Ramone shivered in elation.

Heather stood up and undressed as Ramone watched with anticipation. She squeezed and played with her breasts as she disrobed. She took off her silky panties that she first whiffed and then tossed over Ramone's face who became even more excited by her fragrance. By now, Heather was completely naked standing in front of him face-to-face. Ramone took delight in viewing Heather rubbing his fingers slowly across her lips. His mind raced with all of the sexual acts he planned to perform on Heather's curvaceous and sensual body that night. They simultaneously locked eyes, and Ramone repeatedly made love to Heather who seemed insatiable. Captivated with each other's passion, each time they made love, they were hungrier than the last knowing the height of pleasure previously received.

Physically exhausted, but overwhelmingly content, Ramone and Heather finally lay side by side embracing each other. A milestone was accomplished in his plan. Ramone thought about how Jasper had once made love to the woman he was now sharing a bed. Now the dominant force, Ramone reflected on how Jasper had ravaged his wife, Solae. But he would not do the same to Heather. There was nothing to be gained. Ramone's objectives were loftier than a physical tryst and a degrading dismissal. Heather was a great lover, and he took full pleasure in his night in Greece and the future potential she could offer. Ramone could understand how easily it would be to fall in love with this intelligent, sexy, strong woman. But he could not lose sight of his broader purpose.

The following morning, they enjoyed breakfast on the upper deck of the yacht. Ramone reiterated that he was leaving Greece that evening.

"If only I could describe how much last night meant to me," said Heather.

"I'm sure the impact to me exceeded yours by far," Ramone replied.

"When will you return to Greece?"

"As I mentioned at dinner last night, I'm scheduled to travel here next month."

"Yes . . . will I see you?" Heather asked.

"Only if you allow me to share another day . . . and night . . . with you." They smiled.

"When you return, come visit me at my home in Crete." Heather went below deck and returned with her address and phone number. The pieces were coming together favorably for Ramone.

"I look forward to your return," she said as she handed him the paper.

Ramone remarked, "I greatly look forward to seeing you and embracing you again." They kissed each other good-bye.

* * *

Ramone returned to his hotel. Solae was in the lobby waiting for him with their luggage.

"Where were you last night?" Solae asked.

"I had business to take care of." Solae knew Ramone lied, but she chose to avoid making a scene.

"I checked out the hotel for us."

"Already? Damn, Solae, I wanted to take a shower and change."

"Well then, perhaps you should have been back at the hotel last night. Even a phone call would have been respectful."

"Stop the whining."

"You were with Heather, weren't you? You still smell like her stink sweat. How dare you insult me with that woman's stench on your lips!"

Ramone grinded his teeth and put his nose directly in Solae's face and used his pointer finger to tap on her cheek.

"Listen, I am working hard at trying to make a frog leap in our place in this world. Do you think that can be accomplished if you are going to question my every move? I've put up with enough setbacks from you, Solae. You've failed me on several occasions over the years. Just leave me alone so I can fulfill what I need to do . . . for us. Do you hear me?" Solae was silent. "Now come on and let me see if I can shower in the health club."

* * *

The following month, Ramone returned to Greece to visit Heather. When he arrived at Heather's home in Crete, the attendant Melos answered the doorbell.

"Yes, sir, may I help you?" asked Melos.

"My name is Ramone Santos. I am here to see Heather."

"Ah yes, Mr. Santos. Ms. Cunningham is awaiting your arrival. Please come in and have a seat in the parlor."

"Thank you."

Melos walked to the back of the home and went outside. "Mr. Santos is here to see you," he said to Heather.

"Escort him over," Heather happily replied. She was anxiously anticipating Ramone's return to Greece. The past month felt like a lifetime to her.

"Mr. Santos, Ms. Cunningham would like you to join her at the poolside."

Ramone walked through the home following Melos amazed at the eloquence of the home. It was lavish with grandiose eighteenth-century antique furniture and he presumed original artwork.

When Ramone arrived at the poolside, he saw Heather lounging on a chair with large dark shades in a yellow sundress. There were four kids

swimming in the lush pool. He concluded the children were Heather and Phil's twin sons, Kyle and Kevin, Victoria, and Magnus.

"Hello, Heather the Beautiful."

"You remembered my appropriate name." They laughed and hugged.

"It's good to see you again," he said.

"And you. Have a seat."

"Thank you for meeting with me today," Ramone said.

"I wouldn't have it any other way. It's been an unbearably long month. I missed you terribly. How have you been?" she asked.

"I've been well," Ramone replied. "How have you been?"

"Impatient," she teased like a schoolgirl. Heather had enough of the formalities that she felt was largely for the kids' sake and wanted to be alone with Ramone.

"Ramone, you've come a long way. You mentioned you had important matters to discuss. Would you like to go to my office?"

"Actually, it is a beautiful day. I would rather stay outside, Ms. Cunningham."

Heather was surprised by Ramone's businesslike demeanor. It was a prelude for Ramone to convey his intent.

"Heather, I was quite intrigued with your husband's trial and acquittal."

Heather was taken aback by Ramone's unexpected comment. "Pardon me?" she asked.

Ignoring her question, Ramone continued, "So much so that I unequivocally can state Jasper Cunningham was a murderer. He had his partners killed, he conspired on rape and assault, and assaulted and slandered my wife."

Heather sat up. "Who are you? What do you want from me?" It now became apparent to Heather that she had made a travesty of a mistake. "Get out of my home with your lies!"

“That’s where you’re greatly mistaken, Ms. Cunningham. My remarks are far from being lies.”

“I invited you into my life . . . my home . . . my body,” Heather said with hurt and confusion.

“And I thank you for them all . . . particularly the last.”

“You made me believe you had personal affection for me,” she bitterly remarked.

“You should consider this information to be close to your heart,” Ramone coldly replied.

Heather stood up, extremely upset, and shouted, “Melos! Melos! Please escort this imposter out of my home!” However, Melos could not hear her.

“Before you do, Ms. Cunningham, I would like you to know . . . I have several close friends who are news reporters. To put it lightly, I’m very closely aligned with the European and American press.”

“Your accusations are hollow lies. No one will believe you. Everyone has read them in the past”

“I have evidence . . . convincing evidence that will further disgrace Jasper’s reputation. It is compelling to say the least. Phil thought it was when I visited him a few months before he went to Spain to visit Jasper. And Phil was pretty damn smart, wouldn’t you say?”

“So it was you. You monster!”

“I disagree. I just want to do what’s right. For the families who lost their loved ones. For Ms. Bodden.”

“You told Phil! You are the cause of the tragedy. You knew that Phil would want to take revenge on Jasper. You were only thinking about yourself.”

“I never could have predicted the extent of Phil’s actions. You should be glad your little pregnancy several years back drove Phil away and that he did not shoot YOU.”

“What the hell do you want from me?”

“Heather, do you really have to ask?”

“Is this about money? You piranha. You are extorting money from me? from my children?”

“Extortion? Like I’m the criminal? Now I’m insulted. By the way, did you and Phil get divorced before you were married Jasper? When did polygamy become legal? Are Jasper’s bank accounts legally yours? Listen, my wife deserves that money just as much as you and your bastard child.”

Heather slapped Ramone in the face and he rubbed the area. “I’ll be a gentleman this time. I suppose this is upsetting. But do that again and I will slap you back.” Ramone continued, “I know much more about you, Jasper, and Phil than you could imagine. So I suspect several things. If the information about Jasper were leaked to the press, the families of his dead partners would likely sue Jasper’s estate. Secondly, if Phil’s family learned you committed adultery, polygamy, and bore a child, they may want to start a case to disinherit you from Phil’s estate and regain custody of the twins. Then there’s the Ignacio family. It’s my understanding they intentionally have not pursued you as they believe you were not aware of Jasper’s affairs. They do not know that you are living off their money. Perhaps I may have evidence that would make them believe otherwise.”

“I ask you again . . . what the hell do you want from me?”

“Six hundred and eighty-nine million U.S. dollars.”

“That is impossible! You leech! How dare you come into my life under false pretenses to extort money from my family?”

“I’ve had enough of your name-calling. Listen, Heather, I am checking out of The Grecian tomorrow. I’m leaving this bank account number for you to transfer the funds by 3:00pm today. If the money is not in the account by that time, I will be forced to make a call to someone who will immediately seek out his money from you. Trust me, I suspect whoever comes to greet you will not enter your life as warm and lovingly as I have.”

“GET OUT OF MY HOME, YOU SAVAGE!”

Ramone rose and said, “By the way, I’m glad I experienced being with you. I see why Jasper and Phil competed for you. You truly are beautiful.

It's unfortunate that you didn't meet me first."

"I SAID LEAVE!"

"Is that Jasper's boy over there?"

"MELOS!"

"It must be. The bastard looks like the bastard." Heather threw her book at Ramone as he turned away and left the estate to head back to his hotel. Solae was waiting for him in their hotel room.

"How did it go?" Solae asked Jasper as he closed the door.

"I don't want to be overly confident, but I think I was pretty convincing."

"Ramone, before we left New York, I warned you that this is illegal, and there could be severe consequences for doing this."

"Solae, how many times do I have to tell you . . . if you don't take significant risks in life, you'll never reap lofty rewards."

Solae was fed up with Ramone's clichés. She spent so many years influenced by Ramone, and now more than ever, she hated his rationalized manipulation of people's lives and his justified infidelity. It was time to stand strong.

"I don't want to become wealthy this way. Why couldn't you earn your wealth through your own intelligence like other men? Like Jasper and Phil?"

Ramone was insulted. "You ingrate. I'm doing all of this for you. When your career was turned upside down because you decided to fuck Jasper, did I ever once blame you? You screwed him for peanuts. A fraction of what I stand to gain from Heather Cunningham."

"No, Ramone. I had no choice with Jasper."

"Everyone has a choice, Solae. You got on your knees to that man. That was your choice. You let him degrade you. Your choice. You didn't tell me about the events. Your choice. Was it really an assault, Solae?"

“Ramone, how could you rehash those awful events. You put me out there. You pushed me into Jasper’s den. You are doing all this for yourself. I never asked you for this.”

“In spite of all that, Solae, I stayed married to you. I stood by you over the difficult years. Now I need for you to stand by me on this.”

“I’m ashamed of what our lives have become.”

“Listen, you’re weighing me down. I have to take care of business.” Ramone stormed out of the hotel room.

Several hours later, Ramone called Solae at the hotel.

“She did it! Heather transferred the money. I’m looking at getting my share . . . a cool sixty million in cash coming my way. Baby, we did it! We are on easy street. Listen, I am heading over to the designated drop-off location to receive my money. Solae, I need for you to make the call now just like we discussed this morning. Tell the person who answers the phone that it’s done and that I will meet them in thirty minutes at the agreed-upon site.” As Ramone enthusiastically drove off to collect his payment, he thought about his meetings with Antonio Ignacio immediately after returning from Madelyn’s birthday party in Greece.

Flashback: Three Weeks Prior

“I’m glad that we have finally gotten an opportunity to meet, Mr. Ignacio,” said Ramone.

“What can I do for you?” replied Antonio unimpressed.

“I would like to help you get your money back. The money that Jasper Cunningham stole from you.”

Antonio looked at Ramone skeptically. Ramone had requested the meeting in Michigan with Antonio under the pretense that he would propose a marketing plan to revive the steel business.

“What money are you referring to?

“The \$689 million he stole from your organization.”

“Really? And if that were true, how do you intend to do so?”

“I think you can leave that up to me. There are several things I will need, however. I’m requesting two round-trip airplane tickets to Greece, a room at a five-star hotel, and I need for you to establish an offshore bank account in my name that could receive the money without any questions. I will earn 60 percent of what I am able to retrieve.”

Recognizing Ramone’s naïvety, Antonio clapped his hands sarcastically. “You must have me mistaken for someone else. Have a nice day, Mr. Santos.” Antonio rose and walked toward his office door.

“I understand. Discretion is paramount.” Ramone got up and handed Antonio a business card. “Check me out. Here is my number. Call me when you want to do business.”

Three days later, Antonio summoned Ramone to meet him at a neutral location in upstate New York. Although Antonio was not impressed by Ramone and knew Ramone was outside of his league, he decided to play along with Ramone’s game. Aware that he could force Ramone to provide him with the information regarding his money, he wanted to learn all that could be discovered by establishing a relationship with him.

“Mr. Santos, I’m a gambling man. I think you’re worth the risk. But of course, there’s risk on my end as well. I’ll have my financiers set up an offshore bank account. I’ll also give you the travel and hotel you request. But you can’t get 60 percent of my money.”

“Then the deal is off,” replied Ramone.

Antonio was incensed. “Do you think I will let you just walk away having any information about what belongs to me? THIS is how it’s going to be! I want to know who has my money and where that person can be found. You’ll receive 10 percent of my money in cash and not a dime more. The account will not be in your name, but instead in the name of a neutral party that I designate. Furthermore, whosoever has my money will be mine to contend with.”

“No deal. If the money is returned, that person will be left alone.” Although Ramone felt he and Solae deserved the money, he did not want Heather harmed.

The two men weighed their alternatives against their ultimate objectives. Antonio realized it was easier to agree to get Ramone to proceed. While Ramone knew that 10 percent was more money than he would ever see in his lifetime. The men shook hands.

* * *

Ramone waited at the drop-off location for Antonio Ignacio's contact to arrive with his 10 percent share of the money that Heather transferred. Ramone waited until 4:00 pm, an additional thirty minutes over the stated time when he decided to call the contact.

"Where are you? The money was transferred," said Ramone.

"What are you talking about? It's too late."

"I don't understand. She complied with the agreement. Call off any harm to Heather Cunningham," Ramone said.

"Did you think this was a game? You were supposed to call by 3:00 pm."

"What are you talking about?" asked Ramone.

"The hit is called. It may have been executed already. It was scheduled for four thirty if we did not hear from you."

"But the call was made. My wife made the call."

"No call was made."

"Stop the hit! Stop the hit!" exclaimed Ramone.

"Don't be so naïve, boy. You need to stick to fashion shows." The person on the other end of the phone hung up.

"NO! NO!" Ramone exclaimed.

Ramone called Solae bewildered.

"Solae . . . Solae. Did you make the call? Did you do as I asked?"

"What's going on, Ramone?"

"Solae, did you make the phone call today?"

“Listen, Ramone. I had no intention of furthering your illegal scheme to extort money from that woman. No, I did not make the call.”

“SOLAE . . . NO! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE? DEAR GOD! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?”

“What happened? What was that call all about?” asked Solae.

“The Ignacio family sent a sharpshooter out to kill Heather Cunningham.”

“The Ignacio family? Ramone, how did you get involved with those mobsters? What is wrong with you?”

“I need to warn her.”

“What? Are you crazy? You’ll be killed too.”

Ramone hung up the phone. Unaware of the consequences, Solae had decided not to take part in stealing money from Heather, so she did not make the phone call Ramone requested. Therefore, the contact concluded that when they did not receive Ramone’s call, Heather had not transferred the money and that she was to be killed. Ramone entered his car to drive twenty-five miles into the country to Heather’s home. As he drove along the unpaved roads, the sky became dark, and heavy rains followed. Every five minutes, lightning flashed and thunder sounded. Ignoring the weather conditions, Ramone sped down the unfamiliar country roads nearly crashing into oncoming cars.

Unbeknownst to Ramone, Antonio Ignacio had never planned to pay Ramone the money. Ignacio had already confirmed the money was in his designated account and embarked on his own plan.

There was a knock on the room door at Ramone’s hotel room. Assuming that Ramone had come to his senses, Solae walked toward the door and remarked, “Thank goodness, you decided to come back.” She opened the door and was greeted by an armed man who shot a bullet in her temple. Solae fell to the ground instantly killed. The armed man searched the hotel room for Ramone and made a call on his cell.

“Fashion boy is not here.”

The person on the other end of the phone replied, “That son of a bitch.” There was a pause. “He must be with the Cunningham woman. Find them and take them both out.”

“What if they’re with the children?”

“Get rid of the children too.”

Ramone pulled up to Heather’s house and ran to the front door. He frantically rang the bell, but no one answered. He banged continuously on the door concluding the rain and thunder prevented Heather from hearing the bell. He shouted her name; however, there was still no answer. He concluded that it was too late—she already had been killed. He needed to leave the scene immediately before he would be questioned or, worse yet, implicated for murder.

As Ramone started to run back to his car completely soaked from the torrential downpour, Heather’s Mercedes Benz pulled up. She was alone and immediately spotted Ramone. Unaware of Ramone’s intent, Heather assumed he had gotten the money that she transferred and had now returned to harm her and her family. She pulled out the gun that Jasper had taught her to use and jumped out the car which was still running with the high beam headlights on.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Heather sternly asked as she pointed the gun at Ramone.

Ramone immediately raised both of his hands in the air. “I’ve come to warn you. You’ve got to leave here at once,” Ramone desperately replied.

“I gave you the money. What more do you want?”

“It’s not me. It’s them. There was a misunderstanding. Look . . . there’s no time to explain. You have to get out of here.”

Heather continued pointing the gun at Ramone in the rainstorm. “You just extorted my life from me. To make it even worse, Jasper’s money was not in the bank account! The bank representatives told me today that Jasper’s account was zeroed out months ago! I didn’t even know until today! I had to give you my own money, you bastard. My father’s life! Phil’s wealth! My family’s inheritance!”

“What? What are you talking about?” Ramone was confused but recognized time was critical. “You have to leave this place now!”

“Why on earth should I believe anything you say?”

“You’re right. You shouldn’t believe me. But you have nothing to lose.”

“You took away my children’s future. We will have to leave our place. Our life as we know it will no longer exist. Our home will be gone. You took everything!”

“I did not take everything. You are a rich woman on your own. I only took what rightfully did not belong to Jasper.”

“Didn’t you hear me? There was no money! Jasper’s account was zeroed out! I gave you all of my family’s inheritance!” she cried.

“Dear god, I didn’t mean for any harm to come to you. I just wanted the money. Listen . . . they are coming to kill you. You have to leave. Get your children now and leave!”

Heather looked at Ramone’s eyes and saw a glimmer of truth. However, she did not lower the gun. They continued to argue at the front door in the heavy rain. In the interim, a car with dark windows pulled up. There were two men sitting in the car observing the dispute from the roadside. The heavy rain and wind made it difficult for them to clearly see what was going on. Consumed in their argument, Ramone and Heather were unaware of the car.

“Take them both out,” the driver said. The man in the passenger seat rolled down his window about one inch, just enough for the barrel of his gun to peer out.

“They keep moving around. I’m not sure I can get a good shot.” He aimed at his first target when he saw the Spanish police slowly drive up to the scene. Apparently, Martha had been inside the house all the while and called the local authorities. Simultaneously, Martha came downstairs and opened the front door to let Heather inside. The kids were surrounding Martha. The police saw Heather holding the gun aimed at Ramone whose arms were still up.

Given the police were there, the car with the gunman only had time for one shot. The heavy rain and blowing trees continued to obstruct the gunman's view.

"Fire now and let's get out of here," the driver said. The gunman fired wildly toward the front door of Heather's house. The police heard the gunshot and turned and fired toward the gunman's car as it sped away. The gunman's bullet had successfully hit his first target. Ramone was shot and lay dead on the front steps of the Cunningham home. Heather dropped her gun and ran to hug her children in the doorway.

* * *

On a warm, sunny private beach on her native island of St. Tilly, Tracey Bodden relished the ocean breeze topless in a flesh-tone string bikini bottom. The sand sparkled like diamonds in the afternoon sun. Tracey's large brown sunglasses could barely shelter her eyes from the glistening. Tracey's coconut-oiled body drank in the sun rays as she breathed a sigh of vengeance. The sliding glass door of the beach house opened. A handsome tall Latin gentleman walked toward Tracey carrying two glasses of mango juice with light rum on ice. He extended a glass to Tracey.

"Thanks, Antonio." She took a sip, and they kissed each other deeply.

After the trial had ended, Tracey returned to work at Dale, Walton & Pierce Investment Bank. Her fellow partners were confident in her integrity and had no evidence of her malfeasance. However, Jasper's accusations about Tracey during the trial were correct. As his investment banker, she knew the whereabouts of all his finances, including the Ignacio money. Tracey deliberately chose not to reveal this during the trial because she knew the authorities would seize the bank account. *What benefit would that do?* she thought at the time. She kept track of where Jasper had placed the money in El Bank de Spana waiting for her move. With Jasper's haste in leaving the United States and his company folding, he had never removed Tracey's authorization over the account.

Tracey waited patiently for over a year. When she believed the dust of the trial had finally settled, Tracey transferred \$600 million to an offshore account in Bermuda. She immediately fled to the island of St. Tilly,

believing Jasper would conclude that she was responsible and track her down. But Tracey was unaware that Jasper had been killed. The missing money went unnoticed until Heather attempted to withdraw it for Ramone's extortion. When Heather learned the account was empty, she transferred her own wealth to Antonio's account to meet Ramone's demands. To date, Antonio is unaware that Tracey has the original money Jasper embezzled from him over the years.

Tracey had met Antonio through Jasper early on in their relationship during 2003. Antonio pursued Tracey, and she had simultaneous ongoing love affairs with both men. However, while Tracey thought she was in the running with two prospective husbands, neither Jasper nor Antonio truly wanted a future with her. She was solely viewed as a mistress, only to be used as means of pleasure and an enabler. Unbeknownst to Tracey, she was Antonio's way of gaining information regarding Jasper's financial affairs. Similar to other men in Tracey's life, Antonio deceived Tracey with empty promises and hope.

Life on St. Tilly Island, however, was lonesome; and she yearned for Antonio's unique attention, his eloquent, uninhibited, mysterious presence. She wanted his strong, powerful manliness by her side. Therefore, contrary to her best judgment, Tracey contacted Antonio a few months after she arrived on St. Tilly Island. Initially, Antonio ignored her calls since he had little use for Tracey in his life once Jasper was gone. But like many powerful men, Antonio was motivated by maintaining a relationship with someone who may be beneficial in his future endeavors, particularly with an investment banker who he could also enjoy sexually. Therefore, he decided to appease her for pleasure and potential advantages.

"I'm leaving my wife this time, Tracey."

"How many times have you said those words? You're only fooling yourself, Antonio."

"You've been very patient. You've withstood more than you should have over these years."

"Yes, who would have thought?" Tracey took off her sunglasses and sternly looked at Antonio. "You caused me a lot of pain. I made tremendous

sacrifices.”

“Tracey, there was a time when I was uncertain whether or not you were conspiring with Jasper against me. I should have known better. I’ve apologized to you before, and I’ll say it again. I’m sorry. The idiot that my nephew brought to your apartment on that awful night paid with his life. Now that my money was returned to me, we can put this all behind us. Come here.” Tracey stood up and entered Antonio’s open arms; the sun’s reflection of his wedding band hit her eyes as he kissed her mouth hungrily.

As she stood in Antonio’s embrace, Tracey finally recognized that she had to maintain a powerful upper hand with the men in her life to be physically, emotionally, and financially protected. Antonio loosened the ties to her string bikini bottom and moved his hands and lips all over her body, caressing her bareness while she looked over his muscular shoulder at the blue Caribbean Sea. Surrendering herself to Antonio, he laid her down on the white sand and entered her body. However, Tracey was numb to Antonio and instead felt defiled from the maze of desperate deception.